Campione! Volume 8

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These are novel illustrations that were included in "Campione! Volume 8".

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カンピオーネ！
受難の魔王たち
Campione VIII

丈月城
Illustration シコルスキー

魔王と姫、
謎を求めろ!!

王の秘密に迫る探索の手!　護堂はその身を護ることができるのか!?
イタリアが誇る二人の少女騎士が出会う脅威の剣士!?
王の寝所の一端も明かされるミスティックファンタジー第8弾!!

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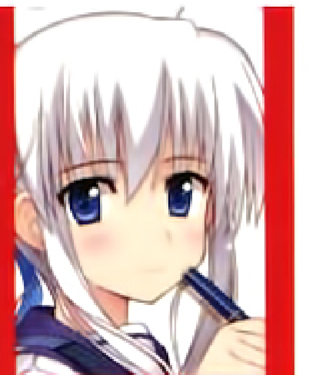

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丈月　城　イラスト／シコルスキー
ロイヤル☆リトルスター 2 ～小さなアイドルは永遠に～
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それがどうしたっ ②天使に好かれる、キケンな嘘のレシピ
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Dソード・オブ・レジェンド 2
三次元の女子が絡んできたが、それより俺はギャルゲーがしたい!
番棚　葵　イラスト／鶴崎貴大
パパのいうことを聞きなさい！5
松　智洋　イラスト／なかじまゆか

ドラゴンクライシス！12 決戦前夜の少女たち／城崎火也／イラスト・亜方逸樹

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カンピオーネ！ VIII
Campione
受難の魔王たち

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スーパーダッシュ文庫　**丈月　城の本**

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カンピオーネ！　Ⅱ　魔王来臨
カンピオーネ！　Ⅲ　はじまりの物語
カンピオーネ！　Ⅳ　英雄と王
カンピオーネ！　Ⅴ　剣の巫女
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カンピオーネ！　Ⅷ　受難の魔王たち

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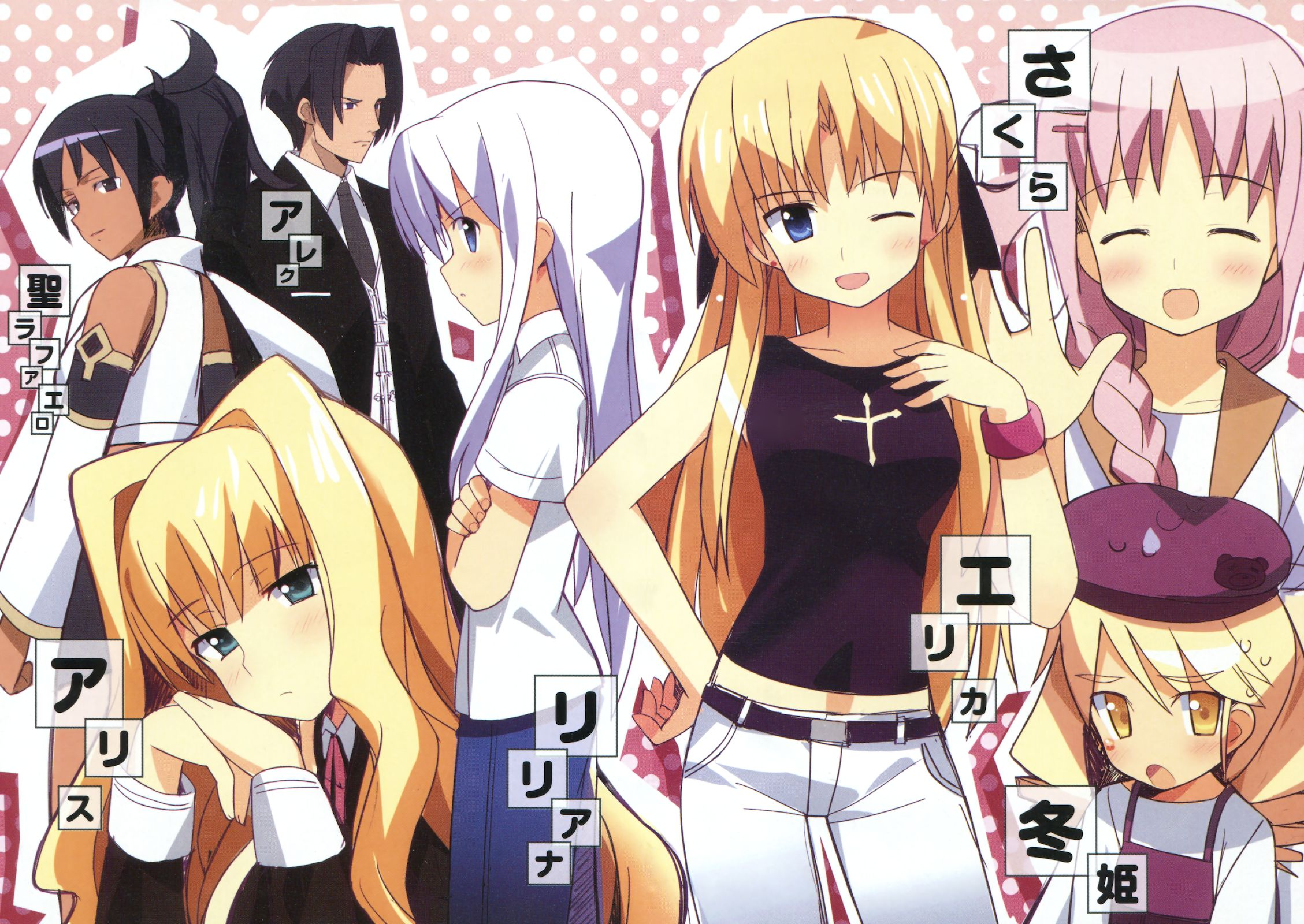
カンピオーネ！

受難の魔王たち

Campione Ⅷ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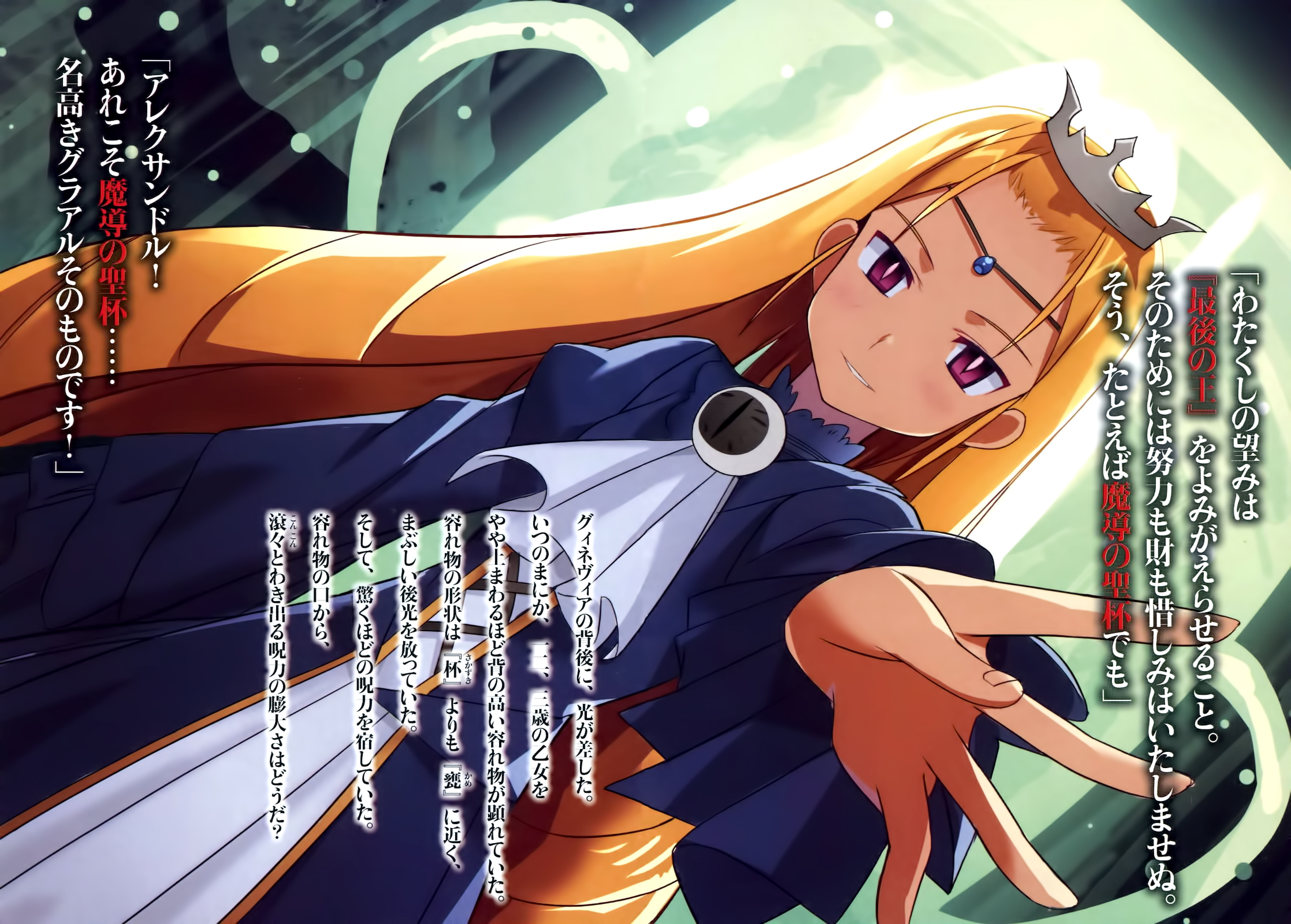
アリス



「わたくしの望みは
『最後の王』をよみがえらせること。
そのためには努力も財も惜しみはいたしませぬ。
そう、たとえば魔導の聖杯でも」

グィネヴィアの背後に、光が差した。
いつのまにか、一二、三歳の乙女を
やや上まわるほど背の高い容れ物が顕れていた。
容れ物の形状は『杯（さかずき）』よりも『甕（かめ）』に近く、
まぶしい後光を放っていた。
そして、驚くほどの呪力を宿していた。
容れ物の口から、
滾々（こんこん）とわき出る呪力の膨大さはどうだ？

「アレクサンドル！
あれこそ魔導の聖杯……
名高きグラアルそのものです！」

「わたしの王様は、本当にひどい人なんだから」
「昨夜のように、また悪ふざけをされるおつもりですか？」
「恵那だって王様のためにいろいろしてあげたいんだから」
「そ、その、ひとりで脱げますから……」

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カンピオーネ！

受難の魔王たち

Campione VIII

おつかれさまでした♪
ありがとうございました!!
しこる
The History of Decline and Fall of th

Chapter 1 - Seeking the Mysterious Devil King, the Campione

Part 1

This story took place before Kusanagi Godou had gone to Nikkou and confronted the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, just as the middle of September was drawing near.

That night, everyone at the Kusanagi house was having a family-only dinner. Three people were present: Godou and his little sister Shizuka, as well as their grandfather Ichirou. The mother of the siblings, Kusanagi Mayo, was not there.

Be that as it may, she was rarely at home anyway, so it was business as usual.

The blond devil from Italy wasn’t around either. The silver-haired knight who unexpectedly caused so much trouble was not there either. It really was family only.

In this calm atmosphere, Godou put his chopsticks to work on the grilled mackerel.

"But I feel like I'm forgetting something..."

"You look strange, Onii-chan. What is it, do you want seconds?" Shizuka asked while getting herself another serving from the rice cooker.

"One more bowl, then. ... but I feel like I'm forgetting something event-like. It's irritating that I just can't remember." Godou said while holding out his rice bowl.

A large serving of rice was heaped onto his bowl before it was returned to him. As it happens, Shizuka had given herself the same amount.

Despite being of small build and petite stature, she was a hearty eater of a little sister.

Not getting fat no matter how much she ate. Not getting smashed no matter how much she drank.

These were the special features that the Kusanagis' mother possessed. Like mother, like daughter; you could sometimes catch glimpses of this in Shizuka as well. If possible Godou didn't want her to inherit her mother’s mental peculiarities like [Femme Fatale] or [Vocation: Queen], but...

"You must be forgetting about Sakura-chan, right?"

"It's been about half a year since she entered college. She had to promise that she wouldn't visit us here for at least half a year, remember?"

"...ahh, right, there was that..."

Koudzuki Sakura was the Kusanagi siblings' second cousin.

Because of the upheaval accompanying the shift from the Meiji era[1] to the Showa era[2], their grandfather was the only direct descendant of the Kusanagi (although there were tales of others in Brazil and the New Guinean archipelago).

But there were a decent number of people left from the branch families.

Plus, the connections that the Kusanagis maintained with their relatives in the countryside were strong. They'd been close to Sakura for a long time, even though she was only distantly related.

"Sakura-chan, huh... she should've visited us more since she finally moved to the city. I wonder why Uncle Koudzuki forbade her to visit for half a year..."

"If he hadn't, she'd have started freeloading here before the end of her third day in the capital," their grandfather responded while sipping his tea.

He might be right; Godou remembered his cousin's personality.

She did her best but at heart, she was shy and often lonely. When troubled, she often clung in tears to those she was close to. Godou and Shizuka had often been the ones taking care of her. Considering their respective ages, their roles should obviously have been reversed.

At this point, the doorbell rang. Shizuka got up, calling out "I'm coming!", and headed for the front door.

"Sakura-chan! It's been ages! Come in, come in. What happened ? You look so down..."

"Y-yeah. You see, Shizuka-chan, there's something I'd like some advice on..."

Hearing the voices from the entryway, Godou glanced at the oldest person in the room.

"Didn't I tell you back in the spring? As soon as her six months were up in September, she'd come here right away. Talk about spot-on."

He was the very image of an earnestly muttering old man who'd seen everything in life.

"You see, there's something I'd really like to ask of Godoh-kun." Sakura said as she entered the living room.

Lined up on the table were grilled mackerel and sudachi[3], grated radish, a salad of bitter melon and tomatoes, miso soup made with nameko mushrooms, and other dishes, but since they had all known each other for so long, nobody minded when she intruded on dinner.

She'd recently turned nineteen and become a freshman at a famous metropolitan college.

But because of her cute, yet childish face, it wasn't unusual for people to mistake her for a middle school girl.

"Can't I help you out, Sakura-chan?"

"W-well, I think it'd be better if I asked a man about this..."

Sakura dispiritedly answered Shizuka's question.

At times like these her face resembled a frightened little puppy's .

"If it's something I can help you with, just ask me any time... are you sure you don't want grandpa to help you?"

He didn't know what this was all about, but besides manual labor, he had no confidence in being more capable than his grandfather.

Kusanagi Ichirou was famous for his extensive knowledge and was a master of dealing with people. He would often be consulted for his sage advice. People even called him "Sensei"[4] or "Master."

That wise grandfather smiled gently at Sakura.

"Sakura-chan, who do you want to help you out?"

"Uhm, if you can help me I don't really mind who it is, but if I had to pick someone, then I’d really prefer, that is..."

Sakura was truly cute as she peered at Godou with upturned eyes.

If she learned to make use of that look, she could probably become a femme fatale.

"So it's decided. Onii-chan will listen to Sakura-chan's worries and I'll take care of everything else," Shizuka said without a moment's delay. The younger sister who played the role of an older one had always been soft on Sakura.

Shizuka was pretty critical towards the band of girls thronging around Godou, but was rather tame during her interactions with Mariya Yuri. That sense of vulnerability given off by a sheltered classy young lady probably stimulated Shizuka's desire to protect her.

"Alright, just talk it over in Godou's room. I'll bring you some tea later," their grandfather casually added.

Godou noticed that he totally dodged the issue.

Their grandfather was often asked for advice, but he wasn't someone who'd start meddling on his own.

He conversed with people in an aloof and indifferent way. Incidentally, in his bachelor days, Kusanagi Ichirou had been popular as hell with the ladies, but he had mostly kept it away from home.

His male friends, on the other hand, made themselves comfortable in his room without his permission.

By allowing Erica or Liliana to come and go as they pleased, his grandson was completely different.

Well, whatever. Godou shrugged.

He was glad to help his cousin with her problems. Plus, he was obviously a lot closer in age to Sakura.

"Got it. I don't think there's much I can do but I'll try anyway."

"It's been so long since I've been in your room, Godoh-kun, but it hasn't really changed."

"The last time was half a year ago, right? I didn't rearrange anything so that's to be expected."

Godou and Sakura faced each other across his six tatami sized room[5].

Godou's room was fairly empty. There was a bookshelf and a chest of drawers, a fold-up table instead of a writing desk, and also a DVD player and a TV.

He didn't put much emphasis on material possessions.

In his free time he went fishing or played outdoor sports. He also would do some part-time jobs from time to time. He didn't have much use for games. At most, he'd socialize by playing a round of Shougi or Go. He'd rather rent than buy DVDs and CDs.

He'd read some books every now and then, but he didn't keep a collection of his own.

The Kusanagi house used to be an antiquarian bookstore and much of the inventory had never been disposed of. So whenever he felt like reading something, there were more than enough books lying around to satisfy his needs.

"So, Sakura-san, what's the matter?"

"U-uhm, you see, that is, I think you could stop with that now."

"With what?"

"I-I mean, calling me 'Sakura-san'. You can just call me 'Sakura'. Or 'dear', if you like."

Long ago he had called her 'Onee-chan', but at some point that had changed.

Godou couldn't remember when that transition had occurred, and casually replied: "It's fine like this, changing it is a pain... but that's not what you wanted to ask of me, right?"

"I-it wasn't! I just happened to think of that!"

Sakura responded while turning completely red. But then she seemed to come to a standstill. Uhm, well... she kept mumbling to herself, and couldn't get to the point. She had never been very articulate.

It couldn't be helped. Godou changed the topic, trying to help her relax with some small talk.

"How is life in Tokyo treating you? Have you gotten used to it yet?"

"...only a little bit. I'm quite uncomfortable in crowded places..."

Sakura sounded dejected.

The Koudzuki family's home was in Miyagi[6]. When Sakura said she wanted to go to a college in Tokyo, her father had made her obey a single rule. He had forbidden her to rely on her relatives for half a year.

Sakura had been horrified. She had planned on freeloading at the Kusanagi's.

"Well you see, I understand father's order that I should try to live properly without relying on anyone, I'm finally living on my own after all... but being all on my own in such a large city made me feel really forlorn..."

"Ahh... well, if you ever get lonely, just come and visit."

Godou felt awkward because he knew the real reason Sakura's father had laid down the law.

In the beginning of spring, he'd spoken with Uncle Koudzuki over the phone:

'In short, I'm making her a gold digger.'

Upon hearing this unexpected expression, Godou had asked for clarification.

'As I said, a gold digger. A young girl lives alone in the big city for the first time... to fill the gaps in her heart as quickly as possible , a man is best, right? Our Sakura has a nice face and personality, but she's too much of a late-bloomer. It's about time for her to get used to men and get ready for marriage.'

'Aren't fathers usually against their daughters finding lovers?'

'Well, yeah, but this is a father's love, too. Sakura's not like your mother. She can't make a lot of money on her own. But a girl can always go after her husband's income. I want her to be happy, you know.'

'Uhm, I don't think happiness is decided by money alone...'

'Sure, but that's the most important factor, y'know.'

This irresponsible uncle of Godou's was actually a tough police officer.

On the side, he served as a distinguished judo practitioner in northern Japan and was an active role model for the younger generation.

Given all this, most people wouldn't guess what a renegade he actually was. It might not be Godou's place to say this as the main family's successor, but his uncle had obviously inherited the Kusanagi blood.

'What are you going to do if some lowlife tricks her?'

'Then we'll make it like it never happened... your mother and grandpa and everyone else.'

When Godou had asked whether he was joking, just to be on the safe side, all he received was a villainous laugh.

He passed on letting Sakura in on her father's plans. She handled such matters poorly, and would definitely spill the beans even if he told her to keep it a secret. His allowance might be frozen as a penalty, so the risk was too high.

"Did you make friends? Or maybe find a boyfriend?" Godou asked tentatively. Sakura instantly flushed red.

"I-I don't have a boyfriend, really! But I made a friend... ah, it's a girl of course, Godoh-kun. Don't misunderstand!"

"I've got it, really. So you made a friend? Good girl."

He unintentionally spoke as if praising a little kid.

In response, Sakura laughed happily. Her childishness was definitely unbefitting given her age.

"So you see, my new friend taught me a lot, so I got a bit more knowledgeable."

"Heh, what did you learn about?"

His older cousin was delighted. Her expression was terribly adorable.

She was so cute that Godou was at a loss for words after hearing her answer.

"Ahhh, that's actually related to what I wanted some advice on... Godoh-kun, if I said I learned to do magic, would you believe me?"

Crap. Godou felt great regret.

It is said that the lonely are easy prey for cults or occult sects. He should have remembered that. It had been wrong to leave her isolated...

"Don't be stupid, Sakura-san. Let's calm down and be realistic."

For the time being, Godou kept his appeal calm and sincere.

"There are things people can do and things they can't. And without a doubt, magic falls in the latter category. Dropping a lump of fire from the skies, recovering from deadly wounds in half a day or calling forth huge monsters, that's just not something a human can do!" Godou declared while having his heart thrown into disarray by countless memories of having done just that.

Yep, he wasn't saying anything wrong. However, Sakura pinched her lips like a child.

"It is possible! I really learned how to use magic!"

"Well, even if you say so... if I don't see it with my own eyes I can't believe you."

"Sheesh, Godoh-kun you blockhead! Fine, right now I can't do anything because I don't have my tools, so come visit me tomorrow. I'll show you that I can do magic!"

Godou was startled. Could she actually use magic?

Godou ruthlessly crushed his anxiety that the Kusanagi family, which should have no connection to magic or gods, had suddenly awoken to the occult.

Part 2

After school the next day, Godou headed to Nishinippori.

The apartment building where his cousin lived was a ten minute walk from the subway station.

It was a nice three-story building with an auto-lock system. It had probably been built within the last decade.

As soon as he arrived, he got a call from Liliana.

"Yes, hello?"

'I am sorry this is so sudden. After school you were gone suddenly so I was a little worried. Just so you don't misunderstand , I definitely didn't want to hear your voice or see your face before you went home. I had no such ulterior motives!'

Liliana's tone was somewhat awkward.

This was Liliana, after all, so maybe she had wanted to accompany Godou as his bodyguard.

"Sorry for leaving without a word. I'd promised to meet an acquaintance."

'An acquaintance... it cannot be a woman, can it?'

"Well, it is, but there's nothing going on between us, okay?"

The silver-haired knight from Milan firmly believed Kusanagi Godou was a womanizer without equal.

As a result, she answered in a stern voice:

'If you say so, I will believe you. However please be careful. You must pay meticulous attention so that your womanizing won't lead to future...'

"I said that's not it. I'm hanging up."

Ending the call, Godou entered the apartment building.

"Ahh, welcome~. I'll prepare some sweets and tea right away, okay?"

"It's fine, don't bother. It's not like I'm royalty or anything."

Sakura's apartment, number 201, was in a corner of the building .

The interior of the studio apartment was attentively cleaned and neatly put in order.

"So, Godoh-kun. About yesterday..."

Sakura was unusually agitated.

A few suspicious-looking items were placed on the round table in the very middle of the room.

A thick, leather-bound Western book. A staff about thirty centimeters long. A crystal sphere that looked like a mail-order special. Tarot cards... all of the items looked cheap and fake.

But with his sixth sense as a campione Godou picked up minuscule amounts of magical power.

Although incredibly weak, those items were the real deal.

"I'm going to use magic now, so look closely. Uhm..."

Sakura started flipping through the book. The sentences were written in some kind of alphabet, but not in English. It wasn't Italian or any other Latinate language, either.

"What language is that?"

"If I remember correctly, it's High German from the Middle Ages... I think?"

"And you can read that!?"

Godou was surprised. He hadn't realized that his cousin's foreign language skills were so advanced.

"No, I can't read it. But my friend translated most of the text..."

"You mean the friend from your college?"

"Yep. We are in the same class and we sat next to each other on our first day."

Sakura was enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities at the renowned Akinomizu Women's College.

So there were magi like Erica and Liliana attending that school for ladies? Or was it one of the dozens of Japanese hime-miko?

"There it is. I'm starting, so pay attention, okay?"

After finding the right page, Sakura put a matchstick on the table.

And while looking at the opened book, without reciting an incantation she just said:

"God of magic, please make my wish come true. Thank you♪"

She even clapped her hands.

"W-wait a moment, Sakura-san, what are you doing!"

"What? It's magic! Uhm, what's really important isn't the incantation or whatever, but the spirit you put into it, and clearly understanding what kind of magic you want to use."

So one doesn't need to worry about form. Ahem.

While looking at the proud Sakura, Godou remembered. When Erica and the others used magic, their incantations (the girls called them mantra or spell words) were quite suitable.

That being said, would this really work? Just as Godou started getting anxious, it happened.

Crack. With a dry sound, the matchstick broke.

"See! Did you see that, Godoh-kun? The magic worked, isn't that amazing!"

"...is this perhaps a spell to break matchsticks without using your hands?

"It's not just matchsticks. I can also use it on toothpicks and small pieces of bamboo!"

It seemed like it's Sakura's specialty so Godou kept his reply very moderate. Which would be more practical anyway, a supernatural power like spoon bending or Sakura's magic...?

Anyway, Sakura had just displayed a hidden talent that looked like magic.

When she disappeared into the kitchen, saying she'd make some tea, Godou picked up the Western book. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, after all, and so he mentally ordered the remaining matchsticks to break.

However, nothing happened at first. Right after he inclined his head, wondering if he had failed...

CRACKCRACK. There was a loud noise. Outside the window, a tree toppled by the roadside. One side of Sakura's room faced the street and from the window Godou could see that one of the trees had broken off by its roots.

Godou looked over at Sakura in the kitchen. She was peacefully preparing the tea.

She hadn't noticed anything, so he nonchalantly placed the grimoire back on the table as if nothing had happened.

"That was that, Godoh-kun. Now that you believe me about magic, there's something I want to ask of you."

Sakura came back carrying two teacups on a tablet.

"Right, that's what this was about."

Trying to break matchsticks and destroying nature instead... The strength of his magical power coupled with his lack of sensitivity was a cursed combination. Godou reaffirmed that it was best for him not to learn magic.

"I only learned about it recently, but... apparently there's a fearsome great devil king in Tokyo."

"A great devil king?"

Somehow, that phrase seemed familiar to Godou.

Pushing his anxiety aside, Godou sipped his tea. Calm down. Sakura couldn't possibly know about campione. As the person in question, Godou was certain.

"Remember all those scary incidents that happened since the spring: a highway here in Tokyo collapsed and the Tokyo Tower caught fire, among other things... all of these were the fault of that great devil king!"

What was it about those incidents that gave Godou a familiar feeling?

Calm down. Right now I need to be composed. I must possess an unmovable, frozen heart.

"Godoh-kun, search for that great devil king with me! I want to ask him to stop doing these horrible things! Will you help me?"

Godou's attempt to play it cool ended in utter failure.

About halfway through his tea, he started choking. Search for the fearsome great devil king?

One of the seven devil kings himself? Could the world *please* stop fucking around with him!?

Afterwards, they took the subway to Omotesandou. It was about six in the evening.

The autumn sun bathed the stylish scenery of the Aoyama Doori[7] in orange.

"So, Sakura, why do you want to meet that, what was it, fearsome great devil king?" Godou asked as he walked next to his cousin.

Apparently there was a [Magic Shop] in Omotesandou that she and her friend frequented. The shopkeeper was very knowledgable, so they were on the way there to ask her for help.

"Ehm, that great devil king person seems to be reeeeally perverted and constantly lusts after girls."

"NO WAY! Don't believe all those strange rumors!"

Godou accidentally shouted. Sakura shrieked in surprise with a fearful look on her face.

"W-what is it, Godoh-kun? Why are you shouting so scarily?"

"Ah, sorry. I thought you were talking about me, so I just reacted instinctively..."

"Hehehe, you'd never be so perverted, Godoh-kun, you're too earnest for that. I understand~."

Sakura smiled gently in spite of his lame excuse. She trusted those she was close to implicitly. Doubt was unthinkable.

"Y-yeah, right, sorry for saying something so odd."

Godou was assailed by pangs of guilt from deceiving his pure-hearted cousin.

"So you see, my close friend, she is from an ooooold family of magic practicioners that long ago served His Majesty the Emperor"

Godou thought he had recently heard of another family just like that...

He remembered the background of Seishuuin Ena, who he had gotten to know a little while ago.

"Apparently there are other families with the same duty. And a little while ago, the great devil king fell at first sight for a girl from one of those families and made her his lover. He even forced her against her will!"

"Don't spout nonsense! She did that on her own!"

He shouted without thinking once again.

Godou apologized to Sakura, who was close to tears.

"Again, sorry. I just suddenly felt the urge to shout. Ignore it."

"O-okay. So you see, my friend is worried. He might also force her to become his lover. That's why I want to tell him to stop doing horrible things. If I plead with all my might, I'm sure he'll listen, won't he?"

Godou thought about how some of his acquaintances might respond.

Dejanstahl Voban would ignore her without blinking.

That idiot Salvatore Doni probably wouldn't even understand what Sakura wanted from him.

However, Kusanagi Godou was proud of his common sense. You could say Sakura's goal had already been achieved. So he wanted to quickly return home, but...

Ignorant of his wishes, his cousin entered a small alley.

"See, here we are. Is anybody in?"

The shop seemed to be a remodeled single-family house. Sakura opened its door and announced herself.

The shop seemed to overflow with handmade goods-various miscellaneous imported articles. [Kogetsudou] was written in small letters on the doorplate.

Godou followed Sakura into the store. The interior was a mess.

Various goods with Chinese, Southeast Asian, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Polynesian labels were lined up next to each other. Accessories, chinaware, clothes, furniture, different precious metals, fabric, folk crafts and so forth were all mixed together.

Some of them held feeble magical power.

They seemed unexpectedly cheap for real magic items. From lows of a hundred yen through a thousand yen, the price tags went up to twenty or thirty thousand yen. Even more expensive articles could be found in the showcases and behind the register.

Godou noticed a woman who looked like the shopkeeper. She was quite young. For some reason she was wearing traditional Japanese clothing and glasses.

"Oh my, dear customer, welcome~. How can I help you today?"

The shopkeeper talked to Sakura like she would to a regular customer.

"Ah, I'm not here to buy anything today. I had something to ask you."

"I see, how unfortunate. But, because of the business we've done recently, I can share some gossip with you for just a smile. Call it customer service."

So this woman really was knowledgeable.

Erica and Liliana or Hime-miko like Yuri and Ena were surrounded by an atmosphere that only the elite, those on the cutting edge of their field, possessed.

But the shopkeeper of this general store did not.

Instead she was more like a grass waving in the wind, gentle because she was not part of the elite.

"T-today I wanted to ask about the great devil king who is said to be here in Tokyo."

"Great devil king, you say? Ahh, you mean the Campione~"

"The campi-what?"

"Campione. It's Italian. In English it means champion. Because the first person to write about them was Italian, they've been called campione ever since."

Godou nodded in silent agreement.

"Well, if that's all you want to know, I guess I can tell you for free as customer service. There are only seven of those people in the entire world. First of all, in America there is John Pluto Smith. He is a masked hero fighting against evil secret societies. He even transforms!"

"Masked!? Transforms!?"

"In nearby China, there is Cult Leader Luo Hao, the Ruler of the Martial Realm. Somewhere in Arabia or Egypt is the Queen of Caves, the Eternal Beauty Madame Aisha. In Eastern Europe there is the master of storms, Marquis Voban. England has their Prince of Black Lightning, Black Prince Alec. And Lord Salvatore reigns in Italy, he who slices through all existence."

That made for a total of six people. At this rate, she would start talking about the seventh person.

Unaware of Godou's concerns, the shopkeeper kept going.

"And in our own country is the last one. ...until lately he was shrouded in mystery, but various bits of information about him have finally appeared."

"If I'm not mistaken, he's a totally perverted person, isn't he?"

"It certainly seems so. Apparently he hasn't laid his hands on just black and brown-haired Japanese girls, but also on blond and silver-haired beauties. He's a huge lecher."

"Even foreign girls?"

"Furthermore, he seems unexpectedly young. There's a rumor that he's not yet twenty..."

"Doesn't that make him a minor? Uhh, I didn't think someone so young could be so horrible..."

The two women were getting excited. Damn them for spouting whatever they felt like.

While scowling, Godou observed the latest development. If this shopkeeper happened to know his name...

"Could you possibly tell me the name of that perverted Devil King? I have to meet him and ask him for a favor..."

"His name... lately his personal information has been fiercely protected..."

Ge. The shopkeeper's reply unsettled Godou.

Didn't it sound like she knew his name, but couldn't carelessly disclose it?

"His name is not well known, you see... a certain organization is restricting that information. But they have made an exception for me..."

"If you know, please tell me. I'm begging you."

Sakura bowed her head in front of the smug shopkeeper.

Damn. The shopkeeper was secretly enjoying this. He had to seal her lips somehow! Godou thought of a certain object. Since he met with Sakura right after school, he was still in his uniform. He also still had his bag.

And luckily, inside the bag, he carried *that*...

He took out his student ID card and walked behind Sakura. He brandished his ID card behind her back so that only the shopkeeper could see his name and photo.

She shut up at once. She had a look on her face as if she'd just run into a brown bear.

Godou put his index finger to his mouth, indicating 'Please keep this confidential'. When he did so, the other person nodded vigorously.

"U-uhm... did something happen?"

"No, it's nothing at all. Also, I'm very sorry but the name of the Campione here in Tokyo... I'm sorry but I don't actually know it. I am really sorry but please don't ask about it anymore."

The shopkeeper babbled at the worried Sakura.

He had not intended to threaten her... Godou felt deeply apologetic.

"Ehhh. Didn't you say just now that you knew his name?"

Sakura was insistent, as if she were unwilling to consent to this sudden shift.

Just then, another customer entered the store.

Godou was surprised. He recognized that face. It was a man in his late twenties, wearing a worn-out business suit.

His name was Amakasu Touma. He was an enigmatic agent of the History Compilation Committee.

"Oh, did I interrupt? ...now now, what do we have here."

While calling out to the shopkeeper, Amakasu looked at Godou and smiled. However he did not speak to him. He probably wanted to avoid careless remarks until he understood the situation .

"Ah! Amakasu-san, you came at just the right moment."

The face of the shopkeeper showed relief.

"Dear customer, you should ask this person about your problem . Amakasu-san here is a specialist on that topic. He is way more informed than I am!"

"Eh, is that true? Amazing!"

"And what might 'that topic' be, now?"

The shopkeeper was suddenly wildly gesticulating, Sakura was infected with excitement, Amakasu couldn't keep up but played it cool. And Godou sighed.

Part 3

"So, the young lady here wants to talk with the great devil king... am I getting that right?"

Godou, Sakura and Amakasu had relocated to a nearby coffee shop.

They had nabbed some window seats and Sakura had just finished telling her story.

Amakasu's pitying stare expressed 'You've also got it tough, don't you, Kusanagi-san.' Sakura had introduced him as a 'relative and escort.'

"Yes. My friend is worried that that person might take her by force. Lately she's been really anxious..."

"You said you are enrolled at Akinomizu? So it's about the young lady of the Renjou's..."

With nothing more than Sakura's self-introduction and a few brief comments, Amakasu had identified the leak.

He was probably spot on. Sakura's eyes turned round.

Still, a civilian learning the name of a Campione... wasn't the History Compilation Committee's information blackout surprisingly poor?

Godou stared at the agent with biting sarcasm, but it only earned him a complacent smile.

"Well, I understand her concern. That great devil king is a rare womanizer and playboy. Putting it bluntly, you can even call him an enemy of womankind..."

Amakasu was smiling broadly. His joy was obvious for all to see.

"Well, I wonder about those rumors... I'm sure that person must be troubled by the half-truths everybody spreads about him."

Godou tried to defend himself. At this point, Amakasu's face turned evil.

"Oh, so you know him in person?"

"Ah, I haven't met him, but that's my gut reaction. I'm familiar with that kind of situation. He probably just wants to live in peace, yet people call him lustful and generally bother him. You should stop with this gossip."

"Did something happen, Godoh-kun? You've been acting strange for a while now...?"

When Godou suddenly started speaking so insistently, Sakura stared worriedly at him.

Godou boldly ignored her stare.

"Sakura, you should also stop this. Amakasu-san here will certainly inform him of your concerns. You don't have to act like a detective and-"

"I will inform him? I feel very uneasy about that..."

Amakasu said he felt uneasy, but he sounded totally carefree.

"Please do something. You're the only one we can rely on."

"I'm far from brave enough to admonish a great devil king. And there's so much other work that's piled up..."

"You just need to meet him and talk a little. That'll be enough to make him understand."

"Wouldn't that be impossible? He's a ladies man like no other, I tell you - he'd never listen."

"That's a baseless rumor. Don't pay it any heed."

"Hahaha, going by the rumors and his reputation, the man himself is unaware of the truth."

Godou's request was simply rejected.

Dammit. Godou had underestimated Amakasu's fondness for playing around. While smacking his lips, Godou steeled himself to give even more ground.

"By the way, do you know that person over there? She's been staring at us."

Upon hearing Amakasu's comment, Godou turned his eyes toward the corner of the room.

As he and Sakura looked in that direction, Godou was surprised . There sat a European girl with her glowing silver mane bound in a ponytail.

The bizarre sunglasses and mask she was wearing might have been an attempt at disguise.

"...What are you doing, Liliana?"

When he called out to her, the silver-haired knight twitched in surprise.

"Y-you must be mistaking me for someone else. I d-do not know you at all."

She tried to turn away. Godou stopped probing and wordlessly pulled off her mask.

"If you have any excuses, say them now."

"Excusing myself is unthinkable. Th-That is right, I was just thinking you might be in danger on your own. I am here to protect you. I definitely had no wretched feelings like wanting to see the face of the woman you ran off to see. Please don't misunderstand!"

Liliana took off her sunglasses while mumbling to herself.

She was obviously flustered. Well, whatever. Godou scratched his head. She always acted like that.

"Got it. Anyway, come over here for now."

The tables could accommodate four people, so there was an empty seat for Liliana. Now that Godou had noticed her, he couldn't leave her on her own.

"Is it alright?"

"Of course. Well, as long as you want to."

"O-of course I have no objection."

She was so energetic that if she were a puppy, she'd be enthusiastically wagging her tail. Liliana stood up. Her face was still overly serious, but it looked awfully happy.

When she came to Godou's table, she asked.

"But still, why would you be here, Amakasu Touma?"

"By coincidence, completely by coincidence."

While scowling at Amakasu's reply, the silver-haired knight sat down.

Godou regretted that he hadn't told her beforehand. He believed she wouldn't be careless because of Sakura, but...

"Are you acquainted with this person from abroad? And is she also acquainted with Godoh-kun?"

"Ahh, who would believe the coincidence, my friend was one of Kusanagi-san's acquaintances, too."

"Really? That's quite a surprise."

Amakasu's reply was inconsistent with Liliana's earlier statement.

However, Sakura didn't notice the contradiction. In spite of this ridiculous bargain sale of [coincidence], she was nodding. Her purity was dazzling.

"So what is her relation with Godoh-kun? I-is she his girlfriend? "

"Liliana my girlfriend? Why would you think so? We're just friends."

Sakura's question made Godou smile bitterly. "Right?", he said as he turned to Liliana.

Unlike her rival Erica, she wouldn't try to make the situation any worse.

"That is so. I am Liliana Kranjcar. I live my life with Kusanagi Godou, his knight so to speak. If you will, think of me as his lifelong companion."

Liliana's self-introduction was stern.

...the person in question probably didn't intend to, but her choice of words was ripe with potential for misunderstanding.

Should he respond by saying 'She's bad at Japanese. Sometimes she says weird stuff. Just ignore it.'? Unfortunately, her pronunciation was flawless and that excuse was holier than Swiss cheese, too, but...

"AAHH, I see. So you're super-close friends with Godoh-kun?"

Sakura was smiling gently.

"If you're friends for life, that's how it is, right. It's nice meeting you... but I'm relieved that you're not his girlfriend. Yepyep, Godoh-kun couldn't have a girlfriend, right?"

Her smiling face was pure, free of the slightest hint of malice.

Godou was thankful for his cousin's extreme purity and trust. It got her into all kinds of trouble, but her radiant heart was a wonderful virtue.

Maybe she was overpowered by that angelic smile, but for once Liliana could only reply "Haaa".

"...Kusanagi Godou, what is your relation with this woman? Is she another lover, or maybe a secret wife?"

"Using 'another' here is strange. Why didn't you ask about ' friends' or 'family'? Sakura is my second cousin and more like an older sister."

Godou's answer to the stealthy Liliana was bitter.

"Oh no, Godoh-kun, didn't you say I wasn't your sister long ago ?"

"Eh, what are you talking about?"

When Sakura cut in, Godou inclined his head.

"Remember when you were in elementary school? You suddenly stopped calling me 'Oneechan'. When I asked why, you said you'd marry me once we'd grown up so I couldn't be your sister. Don't you remember?"

"...oh, right, now that you mention it..."

Godou considered that memory from his early childhood to be a youthful indiscretion.

He felt like they really had had such a conversation long ago. Godou had stopped calling Sakura 'Oneechan' ever since. Thinking back on it, that episode gave him a nostalgic feeling of 'we sure were young'. Though, he was still pretty young...

"So you see, like I told you yesterday, Godoh-kun, don't you feel like calling me just 'Sakura' now? I think it's about time for us to start doing that."

"But there's no reason to, is there? I said changing it is a pain, it's fine like this."

"Sheesh, Godoh-kun. You're always like that."

He suddenly noticed Amakasu and Liliana staring at them in wonder.

"I see. Most intriguing."

"So genius does display itself even in childhood... so that's how it was..."

Both of them were nodding in agreement.

Just as Godou was about to ask what they meant, Amakasu's cellphone rang.

"Looks like a message from my boss. I must get back to work soon," the agent from the History Compilation Committee said.

"It is unfortunate, but I will have to excuse myself here. Could I have a word before that, Miss?"

Amakasu addressed Sakura as he stood up.

"About our earlier conversation... I'm afraid I cannot grant your wish to meet with the Great Devil King, the Campione. Please forgive me."

"B-but I have to see-"

"Right now your level as a magic user is too low. You see, in every single RPG, you cannot encounter the great devil king at level two. At a minimum, you'd have to be level twenty or thirty."

Amakasu put her off with a bogus argument.

However, Sakura quickly nodded with an enlightened expression.

Should he praise her for understanding this level of gaming slang or be afraid for her for being tricked by such shoddy reasoning? Weighing one side against the other, Godou became uneasy.

Given the path the conversation was taking, Godou knew what Sakura would say next.

"Th-then, how do I become a powerful enough magic-user to meet the great devil king?"

As expected. His prediction had already come true. Amakasu grinned broadly.

It was the smile of a tolerant elder. And completely fake.

The aura he was giving off was like that of a fortune teller palming off the jar of bliss or a salesperson quickly calculating the interest rate for a loan for an expensive lithograph.

"Please relax. Through fortuitous [coincidence], a splendid coach has already appeared. Liliana-san here is one of the most outstanding witches I know. With her assistance you will definitely achieve a dramatic level-up. Good luck!"

...He passed the buck. Just like the buck had been passed to him earlier.

Unable to grasp the situation, Liliana pointed at herself, "Eh, me ?" Sakura looked at her with adoration, "Wahhh, you're amazing!".

During that gap in the conversation, Amakasu put his coffee cup on the table.

In the next moment, the business suit-clad agent was by the exit. Like instant movement.

After displaying that mysterious feat, he saluted.

Liliana and Godou were left behind to calm Sakura, who was eagerly begging to be taught magic.

That night at the Kusanagi house. Godou was in his room when his cellphone rang.

The display showed an unknown number. Godou still pressed the button with conviction.

'Yo, Thanks for today. How did it turn out in the end?'

It really was Amakasu's voice. Godou answered while nodding.

"We somehow settled it but..."

Godou had repeatedly told the overexcited Sakura to calm down.

He'd told her that he'd do something about the situation so she should go home for now. That had ended matters for the time being. Still, the problem had only been postponed, not resolved.

'So isn't it settled? Tricking her with tons of lies must've been a piece of cake. Ah, I already instructed her friend. There's no chance of her giving away your name. Please relax.'

"...instructed?"

'Yes. While devious, I allowed myself to use a quiet yet effective method.'

That left many possibilities. Should he probe deeper?

Godou was troubled, but Amakasu continued lightheartedly.

'But how about just coming out with who you are, honestly telling everyone that you're that rumored devil king? It'd be much less of a hassle that way!'

"As if I could do that. And anyway, I don't know why the heck people are saying that about me! Plus, everyone's acting like I'm some terrible lech..."

Amakasu rudely laughed off Godou's grumblings.

'Sorry for that. But you know, you get what you deserve, or something. Hey, Kusanagi-san, why did you call Liliana-san over in the coffee shop? You knew she'd be in the way, so why didn't you chase her away?'

"I couldn't do that either. Having fun with everyone but her? What can I say, I just didn't like the idea of doing so."

'Then what about your relative? I know she's pure and lovely, which stimulates your desire to protect her, but frankly, wasn't taking care of her for ten-odd years a pain? If it were me, I'd have made a plausible excuse and abandoned her.'

"Hmm, it certainly was a pain, but..."

Godou scratched his head.

Amakasu's comments had been quite cutting, but nevertheless correct.

"But abandoning her would be even worse. Actually I quite like her. When she wants to rely on me when she's at her wit's end, I want to do what I can."

'And by spoiling them like that you arrived where you are today. So that's how you raise your flags.'

Godou couldn't understand Amakasu's comments.

'Should you ever need our assistance, please say so. We will do our utmost to help.'

"At that time, please don't mess around like you did earlier today. You're really going to help me, aren't you?"

'... Of course I am. Please have faith in me!'

The short pause between question and reply made the latter completely unconvincing.

'But, well, this level of trouble is nothing to worry about. Deception still works.'

"Deception?"

'Correct. Among the hime-miko, there are some who can alter people's memories. Even without such a power, you can tamper with memories through hypnotism magic. The devious move I talked about earlier is a one type of such magic.'

Ethically, what Amakasu was talking about definitely fell in a grey area.

His proposal was absurd. Godou was amazed.

But while he was amazed, he was grateful that such a method existed. Giving it some thought, he hadn't pulverized some highway in the capital or the San Pietro Cathedral in this case: Using such magic was certainly a valid way to conceal the events.

ーTake the evil with the good.

Because many of his friends and family were of dubious character, Godou had naturally adopted that stance.

There were some problems you just couldn't solve with justice and sound arguments. You had to face such crises with appropriate responses.

Godou was relieved to end the call from Amakasu on a peaceful note.

Without realizing that his mindset was not peaceful or common in the least, Godou got ready for bed.

Chapter 2 - Seeking the Mysterious Devil King, the Campione・ FINALE

Part 1

During the long weekend in early October, Kusanagi Godou had unexpectedly headed to Nikkou.

A week had already passed since surviving the life-and-death struggle there and his subsequent return to Tokyo. Also, certain changes had occurred in the affairs of the young devil king.

Getting out of bed early as usual, he made himself presentable.

A cool, refreshing and sunny autumn sky could be seen outside the window.

Today seemed like a good day. Feeling satisfied, Godou went to the entryway and was putting on his shoes when-

"Onii-chan is up so early today as usual... Are you meeting that person again?"

He heard a voice from behind.

"Persevering from day one, your astounding devotion truly overwhelms me with admiration, Onii-chan. The seeds sown under grandpa's edification sure are flourishing, aren't they?"

Her voice was lovely but it carried a peculiar sting.

Godou turned around to find his little sister Shizuka standing there, sneering with clear derision.

"...How often do I need to tell you until you admit you're wrong ? Show some faith in me already."

"Then prove me wrong through your behavior. And anyway, it is strange for you to go wake Erica-san up every morning just because she'd oversleep otherwise. Absolutely strange! And lately, you've started meeting lovers openly in front of the house -- or rather, having illicit trysts, even!"

The accusations left Godou silent.

Then she began nagging along the lines of 'Don't you feel ashamed before our dead grandma' and so on.

Godou hastily left the house to escape Shizuka's clamor. He felt like he had had a similar conversation in May, but back then he had not met this girl yet.

"Good morning, Kusanagi Godou."

It was a dignified greeting, without even the slightest hint of sleepiness.

She - Liliana Kranjcar was as lovely as a silver fairy and possessed dazzling noble spirit worthy of her title as a knight.

Liliana always got up earlier than Godou and waited in front of his house.

"Morning. Early as always?"

"Naturally. As your premier retainer, getting up after my king is unforgivable. Please do not confuse me with Erica in any way."

After exchanging greetings, they made their way side by side.

Denouncing her self-indulgent old friend, Liliana's expression was a bit rigid.

"In the first place, for you as her king to go wake her up every day is truly putting the cart before the horse beyond acceptable limits. Seriously, Erica is always doing as she pleases..."

"Come on, don't be like that. It's not like it's that inconvenient for me."

This silver-haired knight had been manipulated by the [Diavolo Rosso] ever since their childhood days.

A lot of resentment must have piled up. It was reasonable for her to get worked up into a vicious tone of voice.

"But she seems to stay up late so often. What is she busy doing anyway?"

"Erica is exceedingly diligent when it comes to matters she judges essential."

Liliana's unexpected answer was accompanied by a sigh.

"Other than martial arts and the study of magic, she also devotes herself towards cultivating public relations as well as the planning, design and execution of various projects."

Godou nodded, understanding.

While Liliana kept Erica at arm's length, she clearly recognized her talents.

Their association ran long and deep; it was impossible for strangers to fathom the intricacies binding the two of them. And somehow or other, this might be why they made such good partners, too.

"Oh my, good morning. You're early as always."

Someone suddenly called out to them.

The shopping street of Nezu's Area 3 was virtually devoid of people during early mornings.

The current rare exceptions were Godou, Liliana, and the passing old lady who spoke to them. Dressed in a kimono, she seemed rather elegant and dignified.

Godou and Liliana properly greeted her "good morning" in return and bowed their heads.

The old lady responded to their polite greeting with a gentle smile.

"Lately you're always with girls, aren't you? Slowly but surely, you're starting to resemble your grandfather."

...Was she smiling because of his female companion instead of the greeting?

This old lady was a teacher of flower arrangement who had moved here four years ago. Apparently a lot had happened between her and Godou's grandfather in the distant past. Soon after she moved here, Godou had witnessed the two of them reuniting in a chance encounter at the shopping district. Letting out cries of "Oh" and "my" and smiling meaningfully at each other, they seemed like long lost friends.

After hearing Ichirou point out his grandson, she had smiled fondly at Godou.

Ever since, she would always call out gracefully to Godou whenever they met on the streets.

As a side note, she still seemed to be a spinster even at this age.

"Uhm, she is my friend and recently started coming to pick me up."

"Yes. You could say he and I have cordial relations or that we have sworn ourselves to partake in life and destiny as a single soul . At any rate, this is no ordinary amorous affair for our deep relationship is founded upon bonds of undying loyalty."

Liliana supplemented Godou's introduction.

Her choice of words was rather exaggerated, but that's how she was, and for some reason or another they had made a similar promise.

And after the battle with the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, Liliana had unilaterally declared victory and began to follow Godou closely like a shadow.

She had also announced to the other girls: She was Kusanagi Godou's premier knight and grand chamberlain. They should clearly understand that it was her duty, Liliana Kranjcar's, to manage their king's private affairs and control women's access to him.

In response to this declaration, Erica and Ena had objected harshly in unison while Yuri's eyes became clouded with sadness.

But as soon as they heard about Godou and Liliana's promise, all the girls turned towards Hikari at once. The twelve-year-old hime-miko apprentice smiled cheerfully and diplomatically declared her support for Liliana: "I have no objections. Please take care of me, Liliana-oneesama.".

Her words astounded Erica, caused Ena to pout, and deepened the gloom in Yuri's eyes.

But in the end, everyone agreed to the silver knight's proposal. As a side note, Godou's claim of 'How did it become Liliana's win? I don't get it at all' was flatly rejected.

And after some time...

Although Godou had winced at the sudden appearance of his grand chamberlain(!), he grew accustomed to it as days went by.

Unlike the beginning of the second school term when Liliana's overenthusiasm drove her to obsess over the tiniest of details, in recent times she was gaining Kusanagi Godou's gradual acceptance as an unobtrusive existence by his side.

Such was the current state of affairs when he encountered the old lady in the morning.

Godou had reached an understanding with Liliana's declaration to 'partake in destiny' at the same time as his own epiphany for the sake of the battle against the Great Sage Equaling Heaven.

However, wouldn't normal people misunderstand if they heard ?

Contrary to that sudden concern, the old lady smiled faintly at them.

"Well, hehehe, this sure takes me back. Long ago, I also made a similar promise with Ichirou-san. I wonder how many years ago that was..."

Did something like that really happen between this old lady and his grandfather long ago?

Godou was intrigued but refrained from asking. After a bit of gossip, he parted with the old lady and continued on his way, accompanied by Liliana who tried her best not to step on his shadow[8]

This was when he got a message on his cellphone.

He read it as he walked. It was from his childhood friend Tokunaga Asuka.

'Why are you involved with a girl in the morning? It's too early to fuck around!'

Godou was being assaulted by undeserved abuse, accompanied by an angry smiley.

Asuka's parents owned a certain sushi restaurant in the shopping street of Nezu's Area 3. She must have been watching the shopping street from her home and restaurant without Godou and Liliana noticing her.

Why was she so inexplicably easy to anger, just like Shizuka...

Puzzling over this longtime problem, Godou closed his cellphone. It might be a good idea to introduce her to Liliana and Erica sooner or later. Hopefully, the misunderstanding could be cleared up at that time.

"Is something the matter, Kusanagi Godou?"

"Not really. There are just so many people around me who like to say whatever they want. But as long as they eventually realize it's all a misunderstanding, there's no need for me to get worked up over all the nagging... That's my take on it anyways."

He was the one to decide his own path.

Whether that path turned out to be a fate of fortune or suffering, it didn't matter what other people said as long as he and the comrades following him understood.

When he articulated his unaltered thoughts, Liliana nodded vigorously.

"How fitting of a king's resolution. You have truly become reliable, Kusanagi Godou."

Undoubtedly offering heartfelt approval rather than sycophantic flattery, the loyal knight accompanied her lord Kusanagi Godou as he headed for Erica Blandelli's apartment building.

The two of them arrived at the entrance to Erica's flat.

The mistress and her personal maid lived on the tenth floor of this high-rise mansion.

But when Godou and Liliana crossed the threshold as usual, they were welcomed by a girl who should be completely unrelated to this flat whatsoever.

"Good morning, Kusanagi-sama. It's been a while, Liliana-sama. Would you two like an espresso?"

A beautiful girl sat at the living room table, bringing to her lips a cup that overflowed with the fragrance of coffee.

That was none other than Karen Jankulovski.

Liliana's maid and apprentice witch for the [Bronze Black Cross] magic association.

"What do you mean, 'it's been a while'... We were at home together until I left this morning. Karen, when did you come here to Erica's place?"

"While you were meeting Kusanagi-sama of course, Liliana-sama."

Questioned by her silver-haired mistress, the maid in her early teens smiled nonchalantly.

Dressed in casual clothing instead of her maid uniform, it meant she was here in private.

"Not too long ago, I advised Liliana-sama to investigate Kusanagi-sama's past, but actually conducting it proved to be rather time consuming... However, thanks to Liliana-sama acting proactively with such vigor lately, I finally have some free time to myself."

Karen smoothly made a momentous confession.

Was that it? Those details that precipitated the wager the other day? Godou remembered.

Godou glanced at Liliana to find her face twitching a little. So that's the reason. Liliana directing her attentions to investigate such a weird subject turned out to be Karen's suggestion.

"Today being my day off, I thought it'd be nice to pay my friend Anna-san an occasional visit. Ah, it never occurred to me that I could peep into how Kusanagi-sama's and Liliana-sama's honeymoon play would go, not in the slightest. Don't get me wrong."

She sounded like she had confessed her ulterior motive, but Godou decided to let it go.

The other maid came out from deeper inside.

"I am terribly sorry. Since Godou-san arrived, I went to check on Erica-sama, but... Again, she is still in bed."

Arianna Hayama Arialdi, nicknamed Anna, was very apologetic.

"Well, it's just the usual. By the way, you and Karen are friends? "

"Yes. We became acquainted auspiciously by chance. Really, Karen-chan is so much younger than me and she's already so reliable."

Smiling cheerfully, she answered Godou's question.

This typical cheerful and trusting naivety, was not only characteristic of Miss Arianna but also her greatest distinguishing feature. Well, ignoring the fearsome existences of her pot-stewed cooking and dangerous driving skills for now.

"Alright, I'll go wake her. You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not. I'll leave Erica-sama in your care, thank you."

Even though this had become the daily routine, Godou still felt it would be improper to enter a girl's room directly without consent from a member of the household.

Immediately after Godou had followed his good sense and received the OK from Anna:

"No, Kusanagi Godou. Leave this to me. She may be like a devil, but a man should not set foot in a woman's bedroom so easily. Do not forget that I serve by your side for occasions such as this."

Godou was taken aback when Liliana called him to a stop.

Right. He had been swept up by the flow and gone to rouse Erica from bed every morning, but that was really improper after all. Liliana's objections had made him recognize that once more.

"I see...! Can I trouble you to go instead, Liliana?"

"Most certainly. Even at the cost of my life, I shall fulfill your imperial decree without fail!"

This conversation resembled a king ordering the extermination of the devil king and a hero responding in return for loose change.

Anyway, on Godou's orders, Liliana set off on her expedition to Erica's bedroom.

Their sense of morality and justice was really similar. That made her easy to get along with.

He had felt this ever since the fight with Perseus in Naples. As long as her thought processes did not derail, her affinity with him was outstanding.

--They waited for a moment.

Before long, they could hear voices from Erica's bedroom.

"Lily!? How insolent of you, coming to wake me up instead of Godou! Know your place! I won't forgive you for interfering with my sweet morning moment with Godou!"

"No, you know your place! I have never heard of a knight who needs her lord to rouse her from bed every morning! And you still call yourself an honorable great knight, a descendant of the Knights Templar?!"

"I am the special exception, for I'm Godou's lover! So you stop interfering!"

"Ha. I, Liliana Kranjcar, am Kusanagi Godou's premier knight and also his grand chamberlain. Even if you are his lover, I have the authority to put you in your place should you be impertinent.

Therefore my interference here is exceedingly justified! Will you stop grumbling about these trivialities?"

"Oh really, premier knight and grand chamberlain? Why don't you add another title, third mistress?"

"W-What!?"

"Understand, Lily? Since times immemorial in China, eunuchs have managed the emperor's sexual life. They were given this right and permitted to frequent the premises of the harem because they were not 'women.' Yet you want to wield power over other girls while being one of Godou's women yourself? My, what a great deal you have going there."

"N-No, that is not what is going on here. Ultimately that is just a historical similarity..."

"Yes, but history proves the rational justification of such an existence. I can accept the outcome of Godou's foolish wager, and even approve your management of his private affairs, Lily. But you won't interfere in his lovers' relationships! If that's what you really want, you must first give up being his woman. How about it ?"

"Uh, no, that is, uhm, what should I say, ehm..."

Erica had partially acknowledged Liliana's argument, but refused to concede any further beyond that.

It was one of the basics and the pinnacle in the art of negotiations. Although she was no morning person, she was still able to verbally subdue Liliana immediately after getting up. Erica's wits were just that impressive.

Nodding next to Godou, Arianna was going 'my, my' in amazement as she witnessed the knights' battle of words.

With an impish expression that seemed to be saying 'just as expected, developments stemming from the Nikkou trip are truly worth looking forward to,' Karen secretly laughed to herself. Godou deliberately ignored her.

Anyhow, it was a lively morning.

Kusanagi Godou's days always started in such a turbulent manner.

Part 2

In the end, Godou, Erica and Liliana headed to school together.

The three walked together on the well-trodden way to school. As evidenced by the many passersby who kept staring at them, it was apparently highly conspicuous for a highschool boy to be accompanied by blonde and silver-haired beauties. Nevertheless, he had already gotten used to this.

Kusanagi Godou was so adaptable it even surprised himself.

After all, he had also grown accustomed to his more-than-unnatural constitution as a Campione after around a week.

"Well, I actually had many objections to the details of how Lily became your grand chamberlain."

Erica was muttering with a displeased expression.

"Gradually I've come to think it might not be too bad an idea. If I cling to you all the time, it would be more difficult to expand the roster of Kusanagi Godou's 'Round Table.'"

"...My Round Table?"

"Exactly! You know it, right, the legend of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table?"

England's legendary king. The daring knights who had gathered from all the directions to join under his banner.

The big, circular table where they sat around was the Round Table. The 13th century king, Edward the First of England, was the one who "discovered" the original and had a replica made as decoration for Winchester Castle...[9]

"Over the past six months, the name of Kusanagi Godou has spread among the magi and wizards throughout the world. It's time for you to take the next step."

As Godou recalled historical trivia in his mind, Erica explained further.

Hearing that, Liliana interjected.

"In short, you are saying that Kusanagi Godou should take you and me, as well as Mariya Yuri, Seishuuin Ena and others to form his independent group or association?"

"Yes. The more Godou's power and influence rise, the more people trying to gain favor will appear. Of course, there will also be those who show up out of paranoia or overreaction. Even amongst the upper echelons of my [Copper Black Cross] or Lily's [Bronze Black Cross], there should be some who are trying to make use of Godou's power somehow."

"So to ward off that chaos in advance, you want to unite the followers bearing Kusanagi Godou's flag. From now on, we should also maintain a certain distance from the associations we owe allegiance to."

Liliana sided with Erica's proposal with well-matched additions .

At times like these, the red and blue knights made for a good combination.

"But you know, if I want to live peacefully all along, do we really need to go so far?"

"Godou, even if you insincerely put on airs as a pacifist, it's completely unconvincing whatsoever."

"Refusing to face your own disposition and true nature... I must point out to your face that bad habit of yours, Kusanagi Godou. Hypothetical situations with no hope of coming true are meaningless."

Even when trashing him they coordinated with perfect timing.

Damn them, how could they describe him like a beast starved for blood! Erica ignored Godou's teeth gnashing and continued.

"Then here's a question: From here onward, someone needs to lay down the groundwork in various areas, to enter diplomatic negotiations with the former organizations of girls who choose to follow Godou, and to build an organization characterized by discipline and ambition. I believe that aside from me, Erica Blandelli, there is no other suitable candidate, is that correct?"

The question held unshakable conceit.

Of course, neither Godou nor Liliana could find words to refute her.

"Now, in order to maximize my full potential I will need to travel all over the place. In that case, leaving Lily who excels as both a bodyguard and a housekeeper to support Godou by his side is not a bad choice of personnel deployment."

I see, so that's the idea. Godou nodded.

"So, Godou, you don't mind if we proceed in that direction, do you?"

"I think nothing bad will come off it if I leave matters in your hands, so no. But that Salvatore Doni doesn't have a faction either, does he?"

The Campione who was the 'alliance leader' ruling over the magic associations of southern Europe.

Using soccer as an example, that role would be something close to a national coach.

Without a subordinate association, he was served by at most a handful of private staff. However, he was able to summon important magi and knights during times of emergency. Regardless of affiliation, all were under his command.

Usually, he neither controlled nor commanded. He was the [King of Swords] ruling southern Europe's world of magic by laissez-faire.

Couldn't things work like that for Godou too?

Ruling over those who admired him in order to form a faction. Doing things in such an ostentatious manner felt repulsive to Godou.

"Imitating that person should prove difficult. Sir Salvatore achieved his position by refusing to aid any individual person or faction. Nor does he form emotional ties with anybody. I don't think you could do the same, could you, Godou?"

Godou had to agree with Erica.

Certainly. Given his personality, 'not helping anyone' was impossible. Just like the path he had taken so far, he would continue to meet various people, get close to them, become comrades and they would help each other out, no doubt about it!

After attending a full day of classes as usual, it was now after school. Erica was apparently busy and hurried out of the classroom first. Godou, on the other hand, fell into deep thought as he looked at the message he had received on his cellphone.

The content of the message was as follows:

From: Koudzuki Sakura *Title:* 'Godoh-kun, help me!'

Body: Please! There's another thing I want you to help me with regarding that great devil king from the other day. Could you assist me?

"...What should I say, this stinks of trouble."

Godou guessed as much simply from experience rather than a Campione's intuition.

A month earlier, he had gone about with his second cousin, Koudzuki Sakura, to search for the great devil king. Amakasu had passed the baton to Liliana and, lost as for what to do about it, Godou had suggested 'How about we say... Liliana suddenly had to make an urgent return to Milan,' to roughly bring matters to an end.

When he passed the word to his naive cousin, she believed him in blind faith. Since then, Sakura never brought up the topic of Liliana again.

"What is the matter, Kusanagi Godou?"

"Well, the truth is..."

He briefly explained the situation when Liliana came to his desk .

As one of the people involved and familiar with Sakura's temperament, the silver-haired grand chamberlain frowned lightly .

"...This smells of trouble."

She voiced the same impression. Well, it should be the right guess.

"That's how it is, so I'll go check up on her. Let's split here for today. Since we said you aren't in Japan, it'd be troublesome if you came along."

If it was going to be trouble anyway, he should just take it in stride.

Liliana pondered Godou's decision for a bit, then said:

"No. In that case, why don't we do this..."

Godou nodded at the knight's plan and they immediately went into action.

About an hour later, Godou arrived at Akinomizu Women's college.

It was a famous ladies school in the Bunkyou Ward. A place where a first year high school boy would be intimidated by the mere thought of approaching it.

He entered a fast food restaurant near the school and instantly found the one who was waiting for him.

Godou quickly headed towards her table.

"Ah, Godoh-kun! Over here! Long time no see!"

Sakura called out to him while waving energetically.

Due to her lovely, childish face and diminutive stature, she was often mistaken for a middle schooler.

However, the girl next to her was even shorter and had an even more childish face.

...Was she in fifth or sixth year of elementary school? Her graceful features could probably pass for an artiste. Her long hair was apparently naturally curled and she was wearing a fluttering one-piece dress. Lovely as a doll, the young girl stood out excessively.

"Ah, Godoh-kun, let me introduce. This is Renjou Fuyuhime-chan, the first friend I made in Tokyo."

The introduced elementary school(?) girl snorted with derision.

Then she closely scrutinized Godou and said piercingly:

"You meant this guy when you mentioned that relative's child who could be of service? He seems conceited."

Renjou Fuyuhime's manner of speaking was unusually aggressive.

For some reason, her sharp and severe gaze was focused somewhere above Godou's head.

"Uhm... do I look that conceited?"

"Of course! Why do you tower so high even though you're younger than Sakura and me! Are you trying to tire out my neck, forcing me to look up at you, is that it!?!"

Her complaints were like an outburst of anger delivered with all her might.

The girl called Renjou Fuyuhime seemed to possess a complex over her lack of height. And while only sixteen years old, Godou stood almost 180cm tall. Was that the reason for the unreasonable remark just now?

No, wait, there was one more important remark. 'Younger than Sakura and me'?

"Are you perhaps the friend in the same year that taught Sakura about magic...?"

"Ah, you remembered? That's right. Fuyuhime-chan is my magic teacher. She's sooo knowledgeable and teaches me new things all the time!"

Godou looked at Fuyuhime in astonishment. He had never expected to meet anyone more child-faced than Sakura. The wonders of nature never ceased to amaze.

Come to think of it, Miyama-san in the class next door also looked like a little child. But rather than being of the same age, Fuyuhime was older instead... At this point Godou suddenly noticed.

Her family name was "Renjou." That meant she was ー

"Hey! What are you doing, staring at people!"

Fuyuhime suddenly told him off.

Without conscious intent, Godou had been staring at her doll-like face.

"Ahhh, you weren't thinking something impertinent, were you!? Like, you're so short or midget or shorty or something!"

"Calm down, Fuyuhime-chan! Godoh-kun may be tall, but he would never make fun of you."

Godou ignored Sakura and the fuming Fuyuhime and went straight to the point.

"Leaving that aside, Sakura-san, what did you want my help for ?"

"Ah, right. Uhm, actually Fuyuhime-chan finally decided to tell me the name of the fearsome great devil king. Previously, she had been agonizing in fear of getting me involved."

Godou's wariness heightened. He hadn't been found out, had he?

Had the overly naive cousin found out Kusanagi Godou's secret ?

"Around a week ago, news was received that Toushouguu in Nikkou had started repair work, right? Apparently the one who destroyed that place was also the great devil king, so Fuyuhime-chan got really scared. That person might also do something horrible to her."

"But Sakura said she'd accompany me to visit that great devil king who commits every evil imaginable."

As Sakura nestled closer to her, Fuyuhime face's brimmed with resolve.

Godou became even more nervous. If she belonged to the " Renjou family," she would know his name for sure. She wouldn't say it, would she!? She wouldn't say that name in front of the very campione in question, would she!?

"That's why I have made my decision! I won't run anymore and before I fall to his evil grasp, I'll go to him first and give him a good piece of my mind! I will resist that hated enemy of womankind, 'Kusasagi Goroh'!"

Kusasagi Goroh...?

Godou felt like he was completely drained. Who the heck was that!?

"So you see, Godoh-kun. Fuyuhime-chan has already investigated the people close to Kusasagi-san. We decided we will now go around and demand his location from those people... Would you please come with us?"

Sakura asked him with those subconsciously pleading eyes.

As the saying goes, if eating poison don't forget to lick the plate. But was this also part of it...?

While exhausted, Godou nodded and agreed to go along with Sakura and Fuyuhime.

They got rid of the trash as was customary in fast food restaurants.

While the two college girls were gone with their trays, Liliana whispered into Godou's ear.

'I wonder what the deal is with that Renjou girl? I believe she belongs to one of the four families, Sayanomiya, Seishuuin, Kuhoudzuka, and Renjou, that have deep ties with the History Compilation Committee.'

"Yeah, I thought so," Godou whispered back.

Liliana was using [Concealment] magic.

Last time, she had used the same spell to become invisible on the grounds of Nanao Shrine. That was how she had been following Godou secretly.

"But it's strange how she remembered my name like that... Come to think of it, Amakasu-san said something about using memory tampering magic to confuse her. Could that be the reason ?"

That night after Godou had gone to Aoyama with Sakura, Amakasu Touma had mentioned over the phone.

At that time, he had said something about using hypnotism magic.

'Really? That would be worrisome. If you use that kind of spell on someone who understands magic, their memories could come back at the slightest chance impetus.'

"Eh!?"

If that was true, the deception wasn't really reliable at all.

'It seems better if I confirm matters with Amakasu Touma first. If possible, I will also confirm with Sayanomiya Kaoru at the History Compilation Committee. I will take my leave here and visit those people. Is that all right?'

"Yes, thanks. I'll continue keeping an eye on the situation with these two for now."

Godou felt Liliana's presence fade away.

Having gotten rid of their trays, Sakura and Fuyuhime returned shortly. Rather than full of motivation, it would probably be more accurate to describe their faces as fulfilled looking.

Part 3

Under Fuyuhime's leadership, Godou and Sakura came to Akihabara.

Rather than an electronics district, it had evolved in recent years into more of a town for niche hobbyists. Fuyuhime entered a store located in the outskirts away from the main street, Chuuoudoori.

The building before their eyes was a hub of a multitude of businesses.

The signboard was obvious to the eye.

'Maid Cafe - CurePure' 'Innocent Maid Tea House - Disruption' ' Maid Yum Cha Chamber - Peerless Statesman' 'Maid Relaxation - Go To Heaven' 'Maid Dispatch Service - Plutonium Thermal' ...

Apparently they were all shops and businesses with the concept of maids.

Godou then remembered his three classmates Nanami, Sorimachi and Takagi. Those guys had suggested for the class to do a 'school swimsuit maid cafe' during the next school festival. Needless to say, the girls rebuffed them.

"Could you tell me why we came to such a place?"

"Apparently the disciple of the great devil king, the campione, frequents this place."

Fuyuhime replied to Godou with great emphasis in tone.

He didn't remember having a disciple, so what was this about?

"I-I wonder, a disciple of the devil king would be a magic practitioner, wouldn't he?"

"That's not what I heard. At the mere age of three, he made a splendid display of his unarmed skills in front of a kungfu-type Campione who proceeded to remark 'This child is truly a prodigy, most gifted and showing great promise!' and thus accepted him as a disciple."

Hearing Fuyuhime and Sakura's exchange, Godou thought to himself.

He had an idea of the woman who would attach undue importance to such lines.

Are they referring to that particular guy? Given that eccentric misogynist, how could he possibly be a regular customer at a maid cafe... but before his thoughts could finish.

A boy passed before his eyes and entered the multi-tenant building.

Unmistakable. Staring at the profile of the boy's face, Godou really knew him. However, the shadow of obstinacy and arrogance disappeared from his handsome features as soon as he spotted Godou.

"If it isn't my Honored Uncle! What brings you to this place?"

The moment he noticed Godou, the boy called out with a surprised expression.

The only person in the world to call Godou 'Honored Uncle,' his name was Lu Yinghua. He was the young master of Hong Kong's Lu family and also the personal disciple of the Demonic Cult Leader Luo Cuilian.

"The reason I am in Japan, and Akihabara at that, is for business and business alone."

Lu Yinghua told them as he brought a cold oolong tea to his lips .

After their sudden reunion, he had led Godou's group to the Maid Yum Cha House 'Peerless Statesman.' With that, they occupied a table and began the conversation.

Furthermore, once everyone had taken a seat, maids immediately served drinks to them.

"My Lu family has already established bases in Japan at Shinjuku and Ikebukuro, you know. In order to expand into the prosperous district of Akihabara, we started running this building. "

"...Could your family be behind all the maid-whatevers here?"

"Yes. We entrusted things to my boys stationed here and it ended up like this. At the time, I mentioned it might be better to sell cheap PC parts or doujinshi[10] to attract customers, but my boys got all excited about the maid theme park, so, yeah, I thought it wouldn't hurt to try and gave the okay."

He sounded more like the boss of a new venture than the triads.

So that was the kind of business his family dealt with in such a place. And apparently, people like the Three Idiots existed everywhere...

While Godou was impressed by Lu Yinghua's explanation, Sakura interjected.

"Hey, hey, Godoh-kun. This boy calls you uncle. Is he maybe part of our clan? Although I've never met him at New Year's..."

The Kusanagi family had a custom to get together every New Year's to catch up and renew old friendship.

Not only the main family, but even the branch families gathered there from all over the country. This enabled one to remember the names and faces of essentially all the relatives, whether by blood or marriage.

"There are all kinds of delicate circumstances. Please don't probe any further, Sakura-san."

"...Ah. I see. It must be Grandpa or Aunt Mayo or Uncle Genzou ... Your side of the family is also quite complicated, isn't it? Alright, I understand!"

Sakura accepted Godou's half-baked excuse with a nod.

At times like this, Godou was amazed he could actually feel thankful for the notorious reputations of his grandfather and both his parents. On the other hand, on hearing this exchange, Lu Yinghua turned to Sakura for the first time.

"What, you're one of my Honored Uncle's relatives? Excuse my rudeness. Hey, somebody, get some food over here!"

He had ignored the girls, Fuyuhime and Sakura, so far, but as soon as he learned of Sakura's identity, he immediately became extremely courteous.

Very soon, a maid came over with a tray carrying some dim sum.

Xiaolongbao[11], shrimp dumplings[12], pork dumplings[13], mini-sized steamed buns with pork filling, steamed peach-shaped buns filled with custard cream...

These colorful and exquisitely shaped articles of food were laid out all over the table. Godou picked a shrimp dumpling as a test. Delicious. The fresh and springy texture of the shrimp was out-of-this-world. In contrast to the maid uniforms, the taste was authentic Chinese.

"Godoh-kun, he is such a good boy, right!"

Sakura was overcome with emotion from being treated to the superb dim sum.

On the other hand, Fuyuhime was harshly glaring at Lu Yinghua all the while.

"Enough of this trivial stuff, tell us where Kusasagi Goroh is! I already investigated beforehand, you are that Campione's disciple, no doubt about it!"

"...What?"

Lu Yinghua narrowed his eyes at Fuyuhime's domineering attitude.

Godou did not fail to catch the shadow of killing intent that flashed for an instant.

"Miss, you said something strange right now. I am who's what? And with that conceited tone of yours? Since you're in my Honored Uncle's company, I'll let the first time slide. Should there be a second time, prepare yourself for the consequences."

"...Hya!"

The rather quiet warning sent Fuyuhime cowering back in fear.

Lu Yinghua relaxed his dreadful glare after Godou casually winked at him.

"...Well, let's leave it at that. I have some mundane business to attend to, so please excuse me. Honored Uncle, I hope to speak to you alone on a separate occasion. I would like to rely on your extraordinary insight for a certain matter. Now, take care."

Lu Yinghua stood up from his seat and departed after performing a martial arts salute.

After that, they waited for the shivering Fuyuhime to recover and left the shop together.

Outside the building, the petite yet domineering girl finally opened her mouth.

"H-He was more difficult than expected. Let's ignore this place and proceed to the next destination."

"Fuyuhime-chan, are you alright? Stay strong!"

Sakura directed words of encouragement at Fuyuhime who had set out towards a new goal.

"O-Of course I'm alright! I am still the heiress to the Renjou family of distinguished pedigree. As if I'd lose to that gangster from Hong Kong!"

Hong Kong's Lu family was reputedly in the business of heroic outlaws (Chinese triads), and hence a clan who operated extrajudicially.

Fuyuhime's words revealed that she also knew his background. Right, wasn't she also the one who had instructed Sakura in ancient German?

Equipped with such knowledge, should she be treated as a member of the four families after all?

Blissfully unaware of Godou's evaluations, Fuyuhime led the group to Toranomon station.

Their destination was a shrine not far from there.

Entering the grounds of Nanao Shrine required a climb of 300 stone steps. It was the place where Godou's acquaintance worked as a miko -- Looks like Fuyuhime really checked up on me beforehand.

Next to the nodding Godou, Fuyuhime explained to Sakura:

"Located here are two miko that Kusasagi Goroh has made into his playthings. Furthermore, they are sisters and the younger one is still in elementary school! Can you believe that!?"

"Heh!? That's so dirty, such a thing! As a person, that is no, no good!"

Don't comment. Don't inject unnecessary emotions.

Godou desperately tried to keep his feelings in check.

While complaining about the man-eating demon who wore the skin of a man, the two college girls entered the grounds. Godou followed wordlessly.

Along the way, Fuyuhime repeatedly tried to call out whenever they met a Shinto priest.

But the priests quickly left after greeting with a nod. Even when Fuyuhime called them to stop, they did not stay.

"Th-th-the-th-the daughter of the Renjou has arrived! How can these people be so rude!?"

Fuyuhime was angry, but her anger was ill-judged.

The priests were actually running away because they saw Godou... In fact, this was the usual reaction. Unless Godou himself called to them, they would never approach on their own initiative.

In the meantime, the group arrived before the oratory hall.

The precinct was entirely covered with gravel.

Two girls in miko attire were standing around. Naturally, they were the Mariya sisters.

"Ah, Onii-sama! Welcome! What brings you here today?"

"Well, if you were going to come, you should have said so... I will prepare tea right away."

Mariya Hikari waved to him with a cheerful, dazzling smile.

Mariya Yuri welcomed him with a graceful, refined smile.

The sisters showed their affection for Godou each in her own way. It was a thing to be treasured.

Lately, the little sister Hikari often said 'One day, I will also join Onii-sama by your side, so when the time comes, please love me like the others without distinction.'

It sounded a bit strange, perhaps that was her own way of expressing attachment?

When the older sister heard that, her face turned troubled, but remained beautiful and gentle as always. Ever since the conclusion of the battle with the Great Sage Equaling Heaven, Godou felt the bonds between him and Yuri had mysteriously strengthened.

The atmosphere was just right, or they had gotten used to each other...

Even without saying much, just by being in the same room, they felt vaguely fulfilled. That was the feeling.

But, that aside, there was the current problem of his two fellow travelers.

"Oh? They are also friends of Godoh-kun's? Somehow the coincidences keep continuingー"

"Ah, yeah. There are days where you meet friends one after another like this, aren't there? I'm quite surprised too."

When Sakura pointed it out, Godou could only make a lame excuse.

His naive cousin innocently laughed 'Yepyep. Because you're always doing good deeds, the gods must have rewarded you.' The beauty of her soul was magnificent.

Renjou Fuyuhime, on the other hand, kept quietly shooting doubtful stares at Godou.

"Ahh... I'm not here today for anything in particular. These two said they had business here so I'm simply accompanying them. Apparently, they're looking for someone."

The Mariya sisters nodded "huh?" at Godou's explanation.

With that, Fuyuhime recovered her original vigor and sharply declared:

"You are the Mariya sisters, huh? I am Renjou Fuyuhime. You should know of me, right, the daughter and heiress of the Renjou family, a position even higher than you hime-miko, right? Listen, I must meet that brutish devil king, that campione, Kusasagi Goroh. Call him here at once!"

As always, her manner of speaking was meaninglessly self-important.

However, the Mariya sisters were not impressed. They simply inclined their heads and looked at Fuyuhime in wonderment like some sort of rare beast, then proceeded to glance at Godou.

Indeed, the Campione in question was standing right beside them. One would not normally make such a demand.

The sisters were probably perplexed as well. Godou made a troubled face and shook his head.

Thereupon Hikari instantly replied.

"Ehm... I'm sorry, but that is forbidden."

Although she was in the sixth year of elementary school, she was admirably smart. She had already grasped the situation.

I'm saved... Just as Godou thought so, Hikari pressed on.

"And I'm sorry again. I believe the Renjou family has not yet named their successor. Some time ago, Ena-oneesama from the Seishuuin said so."

What? In that case, Fuyuhime was not a wizard related to the Renjou family...?

Godou was surprised. Fuyuhime on the other hand looked angry as her lips began to twitch.

"Th-that's not true! I will become the next head of the Renjou family! What's the deal with you anyway, just because that dirty campione has been a tiny bit affectionate with you, you belittle others? Listen, the Renjou are one of the four families, we're not someone you can make funー"

Although she spoke faster and faster with greater intensity, she had lost all momentum by the end.

With an awfully scared look on her face, she gulped down her jeers.

She looked as miserable as a dog with its tail between its legs. But she was not the only one scared. Mariya Hikari was also looking in terror at the elder sister next to her.

"The successor to the Renjou family - is that what you said you were?"

Mariya Yuri was whispering calmly, with the beauty of sagacity itself.

"Then I shall converse with you as if you were an informed descendant of the four families. Your current behavior is an affront to the devil king whom our nation has addressed as the Rakshasa monarch since ancient times, as well as to those who serve him with reverence. Showing the appropriate respect in regards to him is the foundation of manners, it is a custom. One who cannot comply to that is not qualified to be a member of the four families. Know some shame!"

As Yuri reprimanded, her beautiful face displayed the imposing intensity of a yakshini.[14]

Godou reflexively ducked. Only Sakura was tilting her head in puzzlement. Completely unfazed by Yuri's pressure, Sakura's inability to read the mood was truly magnificent.

"Furthermore, your inability to show respect to us miko who have inherited the title of Hime constitutes impudence unbecoming of the four families. Leave. You are not qualified to stand on the holy grounds of Nanao Shrine."

She flatly deported Fuyuhime.

As expected of a Hime-Miko. She possessed solemnity and sublimity beyond any normal young lady.

At some point, Fuyuhime was on the verge of tears. Although she had been so domineering in attitude, she turned out to be not that courageous after all. Godou decided to step forward and offer her an escape route.

"I'm sorry for my companion's weird demands. She'll come apologize another time, so we'll take our leave now. Come on, Sakura, let's take your friend and go. See you later!"

The forcible goodbye brought down the curtains.

Patting his cousin on the shoulder, he prompted her to take Fuyuhime along.

Along with the two girls, Godou left the Mariya sisters behind. He decided to send them a text message later to apologize and explain the situation...

"Fuyuhime-chan, if you ask the way you did earlier, anyone would get angry~. You need to do it gently!"

"I-I know! B-But those hime-miko earlier were just too rude!"

The group of Godou, Sakura and Fuyuhime was on the move.

This time they were on the way to Aoyama.

"Could you tell me why we are going there?"

"Urgs. Since long ago there have been many magic practitioners near Aoyama Doori. I heard lately an evil witch, an associate and mistress of Kusasagi Goroh, has been hanging around there lately. *Sniffle* I will capture that woman and this time I will find that devil king for sure!"

Fuyuhime answered Godou's question while sniffling.

She looked like she would cry if she relaxed. Apparently she was rather incompetent. Standing next to her, Godou thought: She had managed it twice, a third time would certainly follow...

They entered a small side street a bit away from Aoyama Doori.

Street stalls and little shops sat in rows. It was the area where Godou had come with Sakura for her question one month before.

Fuyuhime was heading for the focus store [Kogetsudou] in one corner of that area, explaining that the female shopkeeper there was like the representative of the Aoyama neighborhood.

When they came to the shop, Godou pressed his ear against the door.

He tried to hear what was going on inside. Fuyuhime and Sakura seemed surprised by his suspicious behavior, but they still copied him.

They heard two women talking.

'In short, you are trying to get the latest scoop about the Committee from me?'

'Could you phrase it more pleasantly please? What I want are details of a personal nature rather than anything of crucial importance. Such as, which girlfriends Sayanomiya Kaoru went on dates with last week, or that Amakasu-san actually has a wife and kids, that kind of stuff. Of course, if you come across any latest news, you can always tell me later.'

'You've already paid me for my services and you're satisfied with this little? I love helping people, you know.'

'I'm pleased by your offer, but your prowess is not sufficient to hide things from the Committee. Even someone better than you would find them difficult to handle... And all I want to know are those people's interests and personalities. Whether as enemies or friends, knowing more can only be beneficial."

They were smack-dab in the middle of a clandestine conversation.

Earlier that morning, that particular girl had mentioned plans for a "Round Table." Of course, the plan also included reconstructing their relationship with the History Compilation Committee.

In accordance with that plan, she was gathering useful information in order to conquer them?

Godou was greatly impressed. Like Liliana had said, Erica was really diligent when it came to matters she judged essential.

Then Renjou Fuyuhime took a deep breath before the door.

With a determined expression, she reached for the door knob and vigorously threw it open.

"I've finally found you, Italian witch who serves the devil king Kusasagi Goroh! You might feel like you are something big because they call you [Diavolo Rosso] or whatever, but to me you're as good as dead! Obediently tell me where the Campione lives!"

Having finished this declaration in one breath, Fuyuhime was subjected to the inquisitive stares of the people inside, the shopkeeper of [Kogetsudou] and Erica Blandelli.

The Milan-born blonde beauty smiled with great amusement.

"...Godou, I leave you alone for just a few hours and you already found someone with such distinctive talents. What in the world is the idea here? She is together with the Campione, Kusanagi Godou, and yet she asks me to tell her his address?"

Of course, Fuyuhime and Sakura heard her response loud and clear.

Part 4

"Hm, what do you mean by that?"

Sakura inclined her head, bewildered. Godou's head was spinning about how he should fix this, when...

His cousin suddenly collapsed to her knees and fell forward like a puppet with its strings cut.

Hurrying before her, Godou found her peacefully asleep, breathing calmly.

"Looks like I made it just in time."

Someone spoke behind him. That husky and seductive voice belonged to someone he knew.

He turned around to find Sayanomiya Kaoru standing there. Liliana, whom he had parted with a few hours earlier, was also present.

"Letting the situation deteriorate any further would be troublesome, so I magically put Koudzuki Sakura to sleep," reported Liliana as she approached.

"Fuyuhime, regarding your problematic behavior, you will be properly lectured and punished accordingly."

"Wah... P-P-Please forgive me, Kaoru! I'll definitely be a good girl from now on!"

"No way. How many times have you tricked me with those words? Please come this way, Godou-san, and everyone else as well."

Kaoru was speaking with a refreshing smile while Fuyuhime was cowering in panic.

Fed up with the whole affair, Liliana sighed. Godou and Erica blankly exchanged glances.

Leaving Sakura to continue sleeping in the care of the [Kogetsudou] shopkeeper, they went outside.

Since there was little vehicular traffic in these parts, it was fine for the group to gather on the side of the road. Godou, Erica, Liliana and Fuyuhime stood around Kaoru as she started the conversation.

"I only became aware of the situation because Liliana paid me a home visit. As you may have guessed, Fuyuhime here is indeed the Renjou family's eldest daughter. Originally, she was meant to become the next family head like Ena or me or Kuhodzuka's Mikihiko-san and work for the History Compilation Committee."

Kaoru brought up names of important people that Godou and the others knew.

Come to think of it, due to being controlled like a puppet by the witch Asherah, Mr. Kuhoudzuka Mikihiko's mind and body had been severely weakened, and he was currently being treated at a Committee-affiliated hospital.

"Unfortunately, Fuyuhime's body has an exotic constitution which cannot store magical power. Unable to use spellcasting techniques , she was not chosen as a hime-miko, naturally."

Godou recalled Salvatore Doni's past.

That man apparently suffered from the same condition before he became a Campione.

"Well, it's actually not a requirement for a head of the four families to be an excellent spellcaster. As long as she made a clean break and focused herself on the duties of an organization head, it would've been fine. However, Fuyuhime developed quite a complex over her dwarfishness and inability to cast spells... Consequently, she always had difficulty getting along with others and was thus unsuited for field work, resulting in the current situation."

The talentless Fuyuhime had put her all into studying and apparently stockpiled a great amount of knowledge related to wizardry.

But what she desired were "practical" techniques. It was such a sad story that Godou could not help but pity her.

"Well, she is a troublemaker who disclosed Godou-san's information to his relative sleeping inside there, so I'm not 100% sympathetic."

"The one who made her mis-remember Kusanagi Godou's name , must have been Amakasu Touma after all."

Liliana added as Kaoru shrugged beside her.

"Were Renjou Fuyuhime a normal wizard, she would likely regain her memories. However, for someone on a layman's level, the probability isn't that high. His measures were appropriate."

Hence, Liliana and Sayanomiya Kaoru had decided to subdue the out-of-control Fuyuhime directly.

Brought up to date on the situation, Erica nodded.

"...Looks like all sorts of amusing things happened. So Kaoru-san, how are you going to punish this troublesome girl? You're not going to acquit her of all charges, are you?

"Let's see... maybe we should call in a hime-miko specializing in the spirit power of mental manipulation to give her amnesia..."

Kaoru's dangerous suggestion made Fuyuhime cower and tremble again.

"Oh poor thing, maybe I'll simply throw her into a nunnery to train for a decade so she can spend all her time to reflect and improve her character... How about that?"

"Ka-Ka-Ka-Ka-Kaoru! W-W-We are childhood friends, right? Are you going to throw me to the wolves?"

"As one of the organization leaders, I have to prioritize discipline over personal ties. Showing you leniency would set a bad example."

Kaoru shot a glance at Godou at this point. It was a meaningful look.

"Actually, she didn't cause me any real trouble, so can't she be forgiven this once? About me being a Campione... The only one she told was Sakura-san anyway."

The whole commotion was like a farce. However, if they let Fuyuhime off too easily, it might happen again.

Feeling he had more or less grasped Kaoru's intentions, Godou had cut in.

"It's not quite fair for me to speak, considering I'm her relative and all... But even if Sakura knew about devil kings or something, I don't think she'd be able to do anything major."

"The king hath spoken! In that case, she shall be granted a special pardon."

Kaoru bowed her head in reverence then turned around to Fuyuhime.

"That's how it is, so let us express our utmost gratitude to the king. There will not be a second time! You've also heard lots about how fierce Godou-san can be, right?"

"W-What's going on? Why are you bowing down to a commoner, Kaoru!?"

"That's because Godou-san here is Mr. Kusanagi Godou, the very one we call the Campione. Hasn't Amakasu-san's [Derangement] spell worn off yet?"

"HIHHH! I-I-I-Is that how it was?"

About to faint from shock, Fuyuhime fell on her backside. Her legs had given out.

Nevertheless, she continued to look up at Godou and stuttered as she tried to say something.

"Uhhh-uhm, I didn't mean it, but c-c-c-corporal punishment or chastisement is still in order, right? It must be something terrible, right!? Of course, as a daughter of the Renjou, I will resolutely accept punishment, but p-p-painful or scary things are a biー"

"It's fine already. Nothing is going to happen."

She had become inarticulate and her choice of words was baffling. Still, something resembling Fuyuhime's gratitude made it across.

When Godou nodded generously, Kaoru also made a wry smile .

"Well, this concludes the incident. Godou-san, Liliana-san, Erica-san, sorry for the trouble and thank you for your cooperation ."

"You're very welcome. I think it was a worthwhile opportunity for me to find out what an open-minded person you are, Kaoru-san."

The one who replied like the mistress of the house was Erica, naturally.

Despite having done virtually nothing, her attitude was grandiose. She freely showed off her subconscious talent for taking the spotlight, no matter the time and place.

"No matter the kind of relationship, dealing with disingenuous people is simply unpleasant. But with Kaoru-san and Amakasu-san, I should not be bored, at least."

"You're welcome. ...Ah, right, Godou-san."

At the end, Kaoru asked him with a sly smile.

"Why not simply add Fuyuhime to the ranks of your army of paramours one day? It seems like the next step."

"What next step!? Please stop joking around before this turns into another weird rumor!"

A few days later in the Kusanagi residence.

Together with Sakura whom they had invited for dinner, Godou and Shizuka were sitting around the dining table.

As a side note, their grandfather was away on some business. In the master of the kitchen's absence, the siblings and the cousin had made dry curry[15] and salad, together with all kinds of oven-roasted vegetables for just the three of them.

"After that~, Fuyuhime-chan has completely calmed down~."

With a smile all over her face, Sakura reported her friend's recent state.

Because she didn't like spicy things, that night's curry was made especially sweet for her.

"She says that thanks to talking things over and receiving care from her distinguished childhood friend, she doesn't need to seek Godoh-kun's help anymore."

"I see. That's good to hear," Godou perfunctorily answered and put some curry in his mouth.

After the events, Godou had returned to [Kogetsudou] alone to wake up his cousin.

He explained that Fuyuhime had been called by her family and had left already. When Sakura wondered why she had fallen asleep, he simply tricked her by saying it was probably anemia.

Now, as for Erica's statement she had heard just before falling asleep...

'Did that girl say something about Godoh-kun?'

'Nope, I think you misheard.'

Sakura firmly believed his arbitrary explanation.

Next to him, the shopkeeper of [Kogetsudou] was listening with a ghastly pale face, but of course, she did not interrupt Kusanagi Godou.

"Hmm. Looks like Onii-chan was a little useful to Sakura-chan."

Shizuka's self-important comment caused Sakura to nod with a big smile on her face.

"Yep. Godou is really reliable... Ah, right. Lately, Fuyuhime-chan frequently furrows her brow in deep thought..."

Godou had a bad premonition as he tasted the dry curry.

Too sweet! Just as he thought, he really should have spiced up his own portion.

"Fuyuhime-chan said, you know, 'As I thought, maybe I should maximize my charms as a woman to aim for the top. I need to use everything at my disposal...' And she asked me to give this to you, Godoh-kun."

With that, Sakura held out a letter.

"Somehow, Fuyuhime-chan wants to become penpals with Godoh-kun to develop a closer relationship. And some day she must obtain a high enough position surpassing that distinguished childhood friend, she said. I don't really get what she means though."

Sakura probably did not understand the true meaning of her friend's words for real.

Smiling without a care in the world, she handed the letter over. Godou found her smile too dazzling, while Shizuka's severe gaze looked like trouble.

"What's this about, Onii-chan? I thought you were discussing things with Sakura-chan, so how did it come to this? Explain the situation properly!"

Of course, Godou had no intention of answering his little sister's request.

Carelessly muttering 'now what might that be about', he single-mindedly munched his curry.

And then it struck him. His grandfather was strangely competent at playing the fool when things got inconvenient. Surely, it had to be a skill honed through one too many similar experiences.

Chapter 3 - The Knights and the Sword Trial

Part 1

That human kept opposing *him* with wonderful tenacity.

As leader of the divine beings called Danann, *he* swung an invincible sword.

He was a king and a warrior, a mighty god. His opponent, although hard to believe, was no hero. The blond man was not even a mage.

But the long spear swung by that human showed splendid skill.

He could give high praise to the martial arts that child of man had learned.

"Let us stop this, you who are destined to die. However hard you try to fight, it will not change my victory. Saint George, who brought you to this other world, has already perished. He passed, leaving nothing but that spear. Even if you follow him in death, you can choose a gentler way."

Thrust, slash, swipe.

The human's spearmanship was ever-changing. There was not a single mediocre attack.

But *he* did not bother with them one by one. Moving his sword and arm purely by reflex, he warded them all off.

Alas, child of man, your enemy is an unrivaled invincible god.

Most likely the human had used up all of the skills he had learned.

Gradually he cast technique aside and simply thrust the spear. Aiming at *his* — the god's body, he thrust out the spearhead with a clear heart.

Again and again, he foolishly repeated it. With a clear heart. With a clear mind. Not thinking, not feeling anything.

Or maybe combat experience had made him realize the most difficult secret along the martial path, that of attaining the mental realm of serenity and nothingness.

If that was the case, this human held unimaginable talent.

Splendid. *He* smiled.

The spear the human wielded sent the invincible sword in *his* hands flying.

The sword danced high through the air and fell at the human's feet. However, Saint George's spear which had allowed this exploit had been smashed to pieces. Before reaching its end it had saved the human warrior. Repelling *his* sword was truly worthy of praise .

"Your master George has perished and you have reached your limit. Therefore, child of man, your hope has already vanished."

"...Nahh. We're just starting. With this I can finally fight for real. "

The blond human stretched his hand out towards the sword sticking in the ground before him.

Claíomh Solais[16].

He gripped the otherworldly steel that should be handled by the lord of the Tuatha De Danann[17] and took it.

"Spears aren't bad, but this type of thing is still better. If I don't lay my hands on a weapon like this, I can never get fired up enough to enter my truly serious mode. Sorry, but I'll be borrowing your sword."

He was striving for victory, fighting to the very end.

Commendable spirit. It was truly magnificent fearlessness. Or maybe he was just a moron.

In reality, a mortal human should not be able to handle that sword. He shouldn't be able to use it as a simple blade, to say nothing of the divine power hidden inside. Well, it might be useful as a steel club...

He called a new sword into his hands and casually took a stance .

Although not as much as his shining sword, it was sharp. With this he would bring death to the fool who challenged a god. It was the least he could do for that idiotic hero.

The god and the simple human crossed blades, fighting between life and death.

After a long, long time, a winner was finally decided and the duel came to a close. The tale to be told this time takes place after this event.

Part 2

The refreshing early summer atmosphere of June was hanging over the hills of Tuscany.

"It's not too bad after all. If only the one accompanying me wasn't you."

The current location was the southern gates of Porta Romana at the ancient city of Florence.

As the car continued along its way, swathes of farmland soon came into view.

This scenery of green rolling hills covering the landscape was unique to Tuscany. This was the time of year before the arrival of the merciless summer heat, and the air was filled with joy as it came rushing through the open windows of the car.

"Hey Gennaro, you should be a relatively sensitive person. Isn't this a wonderful occasion?"

"So annoying! You are a little girl who chatters away without end!"

Roaring at the graceful Erica Blandelli was the driver, an unrefined man.

Gennaro Gantz.

A Great Knight belonging to the magic association, the [Copper Black Cross].

His massive bearded appearance was full of solemnity and completely concealed his mere age of nineteen. One could easily mistake him for twenty-five or six in age. He was not very tall but extremely well built. A patterned bandanna, wrapped around his head, made him look like a pirate who had jumped out from a movie screen.

"If it wasn't our great leader Paolo who made the request, ' Please give my niece a ride,' and therefore impossible to refuse, I wouldn't have said something like 'Leave it all to me!' without a thought!"

"Precisely, your inability to come up with a pertinent manner of refusal shows how slow-witted you are. Truly hopeless."

Retorting at nineteen-year-old Gennaro, Erica was only twelve at the time.

However, her adult-like beauty and slender figure as well as lady-like demeanor were not typical of her age.

"Since I have no wish for you to drive and you don't want to be anywhere near me, look, our interests are aligned. But you have agreed to Uncle's requests twice already... How about it, let me give you a lesson on the basics of social etiquette right now?"

"Give me a break, I'll never be able to remember your sharp-tongued manner of speech!"

Erica was not sitting on the passenger side next to the driver but on one of the back seats.

Obviously, it was to avoid sitting beside Gantz.

Both of them were knights and members of the [Copper Black Cross].

In the world of magi in southern European countries like Italy and Spain, "knights" meant Templar Knights. Of course, the real Order of the Knights Templar recorded in history — the "Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon" had already disbanded in the early fourteenth century.

However, a small number of people survived.

There were those who inherited their magic and martial arts, as well as those who inherited their wealth.

These people, who continued to call themselves "knights," were not simply magi but also special ability users skilled in martial arts and priding themselves on their noble spirit of chivalry.

(Originally, Templar Knights were supposed to be members of Christian monastic orders — commonly called monks, but this distinction blurred over time, allowing women like Erica to become knights. The original Knights Templar did not accept women as members.)

Whether Erica or Gantz, both were comrades who aspired to the same ideals of chivalry.

But their fundamental incompatibility could not be overcome.

Born in Reggio Calabria on the southern tip of the Italian peninsula, Gantz was a wild and rough but good man with a kind heart. On the other hand, Erica was an elegant young beauty born and raised in the northern Italian metropolis of Milan, as well as being the little princess of the prestigious House of Blandelli (and even tracing their ancestry to a Devil King Campione).

The difference in upbringing was an unbridgeable gulf.

Furthermore, as the closest rivals, the two of them were inevitably going to compete for the [Diavolo Rosso] position. This was the title of the premier knight representing the [Copper Black Cross].

They were members of the [Copper Black Cross], one of the top magic associations in the world.

On the other hand, not all members were Italians.

Particularly for talented members amongst the core leadership, many were recruited from various countries. However, it was customary for the commander-in-chief and the [Diavolo Rosso] to be selected from Italians. And amongst the young and talented destined to rise to ranks of the core leadership, Erica and Gantz were the only two Italian-born knights.

This was the fundamental reason why they always maintained their distance from each other.

The present generation's [Diavolo Rosso], Paolo Blandelli, was Erica's uncle.

His request for Gantz to take care of his niece must have been an attempt to improve relations between the young candidates for core leadership... It carried such sentiments.

— But anyway, the sports car driven by Gantz was now racing across the Tuscan fields.

Their destination was a village roughly twenty minutes away from Florence.

This was an old monastery probably established during the Middle Ages. Rumored to have been built as a stronghold, its surrounding stone walls were of sturdy construction.

After Gantz stopped the car on the outskirts of the premises, Erica got off together with her baggage.

"The means of return has already been prepared so there is no need for you to wait here. I wish you well, Gennaro. Though it wasn't a delightful journey, it is necessary to express thanks for your efforts."

"If you want to say thanks, be more upfront with it! Bye!"

Gantz left and drove off in a hurry.

Erica walked towards the monastery.

Her extraordinary talent had already been recognized at the age of twelve, and she had been officially awarded the title of "Knight" two weeks earlier. Receiving a blessing at this place was customary for new inductees like her.

...In that case, that other girl was likely here as well.

She had heard that there was another who received the title around the same time at another magic association, the [Bronze Black Cross].

"Just as I thought, exactly as predicted."

A familiar girl was standing there in the garden of the monastery.

The beautiful silver hair was kept straight and long. Delicate facial beauty made for a perfect combination with the slender and glamorous figure, producing an appearance akin to a fairy descending upon the mortal realm from the moon. However, the girl's profile revealed a stern expression. Despite her young age, her eyes shone with a resolute luster of knightly pride.

Like Erica, she was twelve years old.

Similarly, she was a prodigy from a prestigious magic association based in Milan.

Standing before Erica was Liliana Kranjcar whom she had already known for the past ten years.

"Greetings, Lily. Truly, our fates are bound together tightly as ever."

"...Please do not call me using such an intimate nickname. Furthermore, our meeting here is not coincidence. Instead, it should be described as inevitable. You too, came here to receive the 'sword'?"

Her stiff manner of speech suited neither her age nor her gender .

This was, of course, part of Liliana's personality, which Erica smilingly accepted.

The silver-haired childhood friend was flawless in appearance and intellect, but lacked lady-like aspirations. She would make a good knight, a good wife and a good mother, but she would never become a flower of the court like a salon patroness.

"Yes, it is exactly as you say, Lily."

"Hmph... I already reminded you and here you go acting intimately without any mindfulness."

Whether Erica, who never changed her ways, or Liliana, set in her displeased expression, both of them were here for the same purpose.

It was customary for new knights in northern Italy to be bestowed their personal sword at this San Gilardino Monastery (of course, it was limited to just the knights of the seven prestigious magic associations).

Weapons used by knights were all specially crafted.

Taking steel smelted through alchemy, master craftsmen forged and polished them into blades further strengthened through alchemy — only such swords and spears were worthy of being treasured.

Ever since ancient times, this monastery had been the holy sanctum where young knights were bestowed with weapons and blessed.

It was said that the Medici family in Florence at the height of the Renaissance was already managing this industry.

"Having been summoned here specially, allow me to express my deepest gratitude. Erica Blandelli pays her respects today as invited."

Noticing the approaching monk, Erica greeted gracefully.

Since she was visiting as a knight, vulgar behavior would not be tolerated.

Erica Blandelli's assertive yet graceful personality made her the center of attention in the vast majority of situations.

"I am the eldest daughter of the Kranjcar family, Liliana. I shall be in your care."

In comparison, Liliana's greeting lacked individuality and common pleasantries.

Despite being a knight with a witch's disposition, as well as possessing great potential rivaling Erica's, she only applied herself towards being a soldier no matter what.

"For a long time, I have heard much about you two prodigies of Milan."

The monk in a black habit was a man in his prime who replied calmly to the two girls' greetings.

Despite the loose fitting garment, it was apparent that the man's physique was very well-trained.

From his approaching footsteps and the manner he carried himself, his extraordinary martial arts was readily apparent. As befitted the leader of the monastery of swords.

"It is truly delightful to witness such outstanding talent from the two girls hailing from prestigious families. This monastery will perform the blessings for the award ceremony and bestow weapons worthy of chivalric honor. May you one day follow in the footsteps of our predecessor Saint Raffaello."

"Yes, in order to become a praiseworthy knight, I shall strive to improve myself."

Liliana bowed her head in response to the monk's polite words.

Doing everything by the book was in her character. But acting in all seriousness did not suit Erica, who wanted to say something more interesting.

"As newcomers like us, I am extremely touched by this rare occasion... By the way, speaking of following in the footsteps of Saint Raffaello, it would be most delightful if we can begin emulating with the "Blessing of the Sword" ceremony."

"Oh?"

The monk showed emotion for the first time, smiling wryly in response to Erica's politely delivered words of audacity.

At the same time, Liliana was frowning beside her.

"Wait a minute, Erica. What is the meaning of such shameless words?"

"My, Lily, what adversarial interpretations. Listen well then, our esteemed monk here asked us to 'walk in the footsteps of Saint Raffaello,' right? That means learning from the great lady swordsman, the one who received the 'Position of the Knight of the Holy Grail,' as well as being the highest ranking Templar Knight."

The title of the premier knight at Erica's [Copper Black Cross] was the [Diavolo Rosso].

[Saint Raffaello] was also a title of similar nature.

The Florentine association [Capital of Lilies] bestowed the title on the their most gallant knight. The present generation Saint Raffaello was a woman. Though she had retired from the front lines long ago, she was still considered Europe's strongest swordsman.

"Due to Saint Raffaello's outstanding swordsmanship, a special exception was made and two swords were bestowed instead of one, becoming a legend passed down in this monastery."

"That's right, it's the Twin Swords of the Lion and the Master Musician."

Erica's eloquence forced the monk's wry smile to become even more severe.

Finally, Liliana erupted in an expression full of anger and glared at Erica furiously.

"So in other words, Dame Erica, let us imitate the story of Saint Raffaello and bestow you with two swords, how about that?"

"Please do not joke of such matters! No matter how much you wish to follow in the footsteps of the great knight, going that far would be too disrespectful!"

"—No, I was not suggesting that. Besides, it would be too impertinent."

Met with their objections, Erica's beautiful face smiled like the devil.

This was completely unexpected. This was Erica Blandelli, the one who always accomplished what no one could predict.

"A few years ago just before her retirement, Saint Raffaello paid this monastery a visit, bearing her two bestowed swords. Back then, she said 'rather than have these two swords accompany an old lady like me, why not give them a more befitting mission of helping young knights in their adventures?'"

With that, she had returned the two famous magic swords.

"Having learned of the above story, we, Erica Blandelli and her ally, Liliana Kranjcar, wish to come here as the new masters of the twin swords."

With extravagant words, she expressed her wish.

The elderly Saint Raffaello had exited the world stage a long time ago.

(To be precise, she belonged to the same era as Italy's highest ranked witch, Lucretia Zola.)

The anecdote of her retirement was picked up while researching the details of various top European magi.

"Seeking to receive two swords at once like Saint Raffaello would, of course, be too impertinent. However, if we were each to receive one of the twin swords left behind by the great predecessor , there is nothing impertinent about inheriting her will. I implore you to satisfy my wish."

After all, if a sword was to be bestowed, it was only natural to wish for a better one.

Erica had planned this from the start. Taking into account that Liliana happened to be around to satisfy the requirement for the twin swords, it was perfect.

However, the silver-haired childhood friend and rival still bore an expression of displeasure.

She was struggling against opposing emotions — anger at being used by Erica's scheming on one hand, and intense temptation offered by Saint Raffaello's twin swords on the other.

"I see. I now understand Dame Erica's wish."

The monk went from a wry smile to a complete laugh. What was going to happen next?

The famous "Twin Swords of the Lion and the Master Musician" reappearing in the world once more and bestowed upon new users — such an event could not possibly happen without widespread report.

"However, in actual fact there are conditions here that you two may not know. The great one has retired in seclusion in the vicinity of Florence. In response, this monastery proposed to her the following — we entrusted Saint Raffaello with the twin swords again together with the task of personally testing prospective new users to see if they were worthy of receiving the swords and continuing her legend."

So that was how things worked. It required meeting the legendary paladino for her personal approval.

Erica nodded arrogantly, while Liliana suddenly became greatly emotional.

"What... Not only do I get to meet Saint Raffaello, but also the chance to inherit her magic sword — What are you dallying for, Erica, hurry and let us set off now!"

"What's come over you, Lily, with this sudden motivation?"

The unexpected intensity of her childhood friend's enthusiasm seemed to be slightly ruining Erica's mood.

"I have always wished to follow the same path as my admired idol, Saint Raffaello. Though it is with great reluctance that I yield to your conniving schemes, it is of no importance at this time. Let us go meet her immediately! Go!"

"......Well, I see now."

Once roused, Liliana's passion knew no bounds. The silver-haired childhood friend essentially acted in complete accordance with Erica's predictions.

Though manipulating her was a simple matter, there were times when she exceeded expectations. In those occasions, even Erica found it difficult to keep her in check. It was exactly like the type of girl who is so simpleminded that she is impossible to understand and unexpectedly difficult to handle.

"So, esteemed monk, where does Saint Raffaello live?"

"For real...? Actually, we don't know either."

The monk gave a perfunctory answer to Liliana's impatient question.

"Saint Raffaello apparently thinks that this sort of information should be found out by yourself. That is why she disappeared into seclusion without letting us know."

"Oh my... this turns out to be unexpectedly challenging."

Erica smiled, intent on taking on the unforeseen challenge.

There were many villages and roads scattered across the countryside in the surroundings of Florence. Trying to find a woman whose name and face were unknown would prove to be quite a troublesome chore.

However, this was welcomed. This kind of trouble, I shall overcome as many of them as they present themselves.

"Other than us, have there been any others who sought the twin swords?"

Liliana posed another question to the monk.

"Quite a few. However, almost all of them gave up because they were unable to locate Saint Raffaello."

"Almost all... In other words, there were exceptions?"

"Yes, one. No one could have expected such an idiot to succeed. However, that fellow was not seeking to inherit the twin swords. All he wanted was to meet Saint Raffaello."

The monk cast aside his strict tone of voice for once, using the word "idiot."

"His swordsmanship was truly exceptional. Yes, having witnessed the skill of so many masters, I've never seen anyone like him. However, he was a complete failure in magic. With such low ability, he was never regarded as a successor candidate in the first place."

So that was what happened. Erica nodded.

No matter what, it was useful to know that someone had once succeeded.

In that case, surely she can do the same. Erica's lips naturally shaped themselves into a glamorous smile.

It was neither a noblewoman's smile nor a devil's mischievous smile. Rather, it was more like a lioness' smile. An expression fitting for the beautiful female knight about to undertake a difficult and risky challenge.

— At this time, an unexpected intruder appeared.

A young man had squirmed his way through the gates of the monastery.

He was a handsome man with well-proportioned facial features and messy blonde hair, but looked rather haggard and lacking in ambition. Despite his slim physique, it was clear that his body had undergone intense training.

Around twenty in age or so, he was from the same generation as Gennaro Gantz. Dressed casually in a half-sleeved t-shirt and cotton shorts, everything was wide open and in a tattered disheveled state.

This young man was walking unsteadily with no strength in his steps.

"This man?! ...What a coincidence. Returning here again after one year."

Muttering softly, the monk approached the young man.

Liliana went over to inquire about the situation.

"Is he affiliated with this place? I've never seen him amongst the monks."

"No, but he is related to the current conversation. He is the hopeless idiot mentioned just now. The method he used was to visit each of the nearby villages, and against every single female he encountered — even young girls and old ladies without exception — he would swing a wooden branch, saying that out of these hundred and seventy people, the one who dodged his strike must be Saint Raffaello. That is why we call him the hopeless idiot."

Well, he did withdraw all attacks on contact. The fact that no one was hurt was rather laudable.

Explaining this, the monk sighed.

Liliana went "Huh?" with a shocked expression. Erica too, agreed that he was an idiot, for it was quite a surprise that such a dangerous man was not arrested by the police...

However, it stood as fact that such an unbelievable method succeeded.

Because she was — rather, precisely because she was the brilliantly talented Erica, such a ridiculous idea never occurred to her.

"Hey, what is going on!? What on earth happened!?"

The young man did not respond to the monk's questions.

Instead, he fell over headlong, losing consciousness. The monk frantically hurried over and started examining the young man's body.

Was injury or disease the cause? The conclusion was neither.

The young man's stomach gave off an enormous rumble. Apparently he had fainted from hunger.

"Scaring others for no reason just like before... Hmm? What, this wound is?"

The monk's gaze focused on the upper body which had been undressed for examination. There was an enormous red-black scar where the right arm connected to the shoulder.

It looked like the entire right arm had been amputated and welded back together —

A strange and horrifying sight. An ominous feeling, as well as a mysterious and incredible scar.

Part 3

"Ah, so full now, I'm so grateful."

The young man was wolfing food down with a delighted voice.

In the modest kitchen of the monastery, plates on the workbenches were filled with hard bread local to the region of Tuscany.

Then there were bottles of unlabeled red wine fermented in the village.

Both were provided by the monks.

"Then having expressed my thanks, it would be even more perfect if I could have some meat and vegetables here. For me, right now, carbohydrates are not really enough..."

"Regrettably, today's food has all been consumed."

The monk spoke casually unlike the way he was talking to Erica and Liliana earlier.

"We've never gone out to buy other stuff, so give it up... By the way, where have you been and what have you been doing all this time? A year ago, after you found Saint Raffaello, you were clearly training under her for a while, but disappeared after a month."

"Haha... That's it, so that's what I did, maybe."

"This fellow never talks seriously, just like before! Respond seriously to me!"

The monk started to get annoyed at the young man's stupid face .

But the young man remained unfazed and calmly wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"I am being serious in my own way. Well, let's put that aside for now, it's time to get going."

"What?"

"My first priority is to recover the state of my body. I will gladly express my thanks for your hospitality, someday... But first, I need to find some place better stocked in food."

The young man got up and quickly left the kitchen.

"So, I'll be going now, bye!"

The young man's footsteps were as quick and light as the spring breeze.

Calling out was not going to delay his departure. Erica and Liliana exchanged glances as they observed quietly.

"Esteemed monk, we will also take our leave."

"We will surely obtain Saint Raffaello's approval and return with the twin swords. When that time comes, please bestow the blessing upon us."

The two knight inductees got up from the table and bid their respective farewells.

Liliana rigidly adhering to preset forms, while Erica was as glamorous as a noblewoman. The monk smiled wryly as he prayed for their safety.

"On the battlefield, only unparalleled speed is truly invincible. Taking action swiftly and never letting fortune slip by—such spirit and initiative is admirable. But that man is too much of a fool, but at the same time, someone extraordinary. Please take care."

Those were the monk's final words as he saw the two girls off from the monastery.

"Hey, wait up! Where on earth are you going?"

Erica yelled at the young man who was hurrying on his way ahead.

As he walked briskly along the dirt road in the countryside, his blonde hair was shaking side to side.

"Umm... Sorry, who are you people again?"

"I am Liliana Kranjcar, knight of the [Bronze Black Cross], this one here is Erica Blandelli of the [Copper Black Cross]."

"Hmm, sounds a bit familiar, did I remember wrong?"

The young man looked bewildered after Liliana announced their names.

"There's some kind of familiar feeling."

"We just met at the monastery. Standing next to the monk."

"Oh, so that's why you look so familiar!"

The young man looked very laid back, but did not seem to be lying.

Could he really have forgotten faces he had met mere minutes ago?

"I'm sorry, I'm someone who's not very good at remembering names and faces — that's what I believe. It's like those kinds of memories are sometimes there, sometimes not."

"Why are you talking about yourself as if commenting on another person..."

"Well, you know, it's surprisingly difficult for humans to look objectively at things related to themselves. So it's not a bad idea to practice this kind of thing."

"Even so, for memories to become fuzzy after a mere five minutes, it is very problematic!"

Liliana angered for the first time at the young man's lack of serious attitude.

However, this kind of conversation was not going to lead to any progress.

"You said you wanted more to eat, so where are you going exactly?"

"Hmm, I still haven't figured that out yet."

The young man complained about his hunger in response to Erica's nosy question.

"In truth, I am actually quite poor, there's not too many coins left in my pockets."

"Well, that was pretty much what I expected."

Liliana whispered softly as she stared at his appearance.

He had no belongings other than the t-shirt and the cotton shorts he was wearing, not even a bag. Besides, if he were flushed with cash, he would not have reached such a famished state in the first place.

"So, I just thought of a perfect plan to get myself a full meal despite being penniless. Listen well, first I will wander around the area to find local residents and yell out names of single women."

"...You know a lot of people in this neighborhood?"

The young man standing before her seemed rather incompetent ?

Liliana questioned with eyes full of doubt.

"No, I don't know anyone here, but it doesn't matter. Francesca, Gianna, whatever, just call out a random name. I will pretend... that I mistook them for someone I know and use the opportunity to strike up conversation, gradually get familiar and becoming more and more engaged. Once the time is ripe, when mouths are dry and stomachs are empty, I will gradually make my way into the home of this single lady, and sit down for a delicious meal."

A perfect plan? How naive of this young man to conclude.

Erica coughed deliberately before offering her opinion.

"In that case, there is an even faster method. If you wish, come together with us to a nearby restaurant — how about that?"

Thus, the three of them sat down at a restaurant in the village.

Soon after, their orders arrived and covered the table: pasta with tomato sauce, mushroom and cheese pizza, fried rabbit and beef, cow offal stew, a large bowl of salad, and a complete set of white wine, rosé wine, red wine and soda water.

All this was essentially swept away by the blonde young man.

Normally, someone who had fainted from hunger would eat something easily digestible to avoid straining the stomach.

However, this young man wolfed down everything in huge mouthfuls whether it was cheese, meat, deep-fried, or alcohol. What an amazing digestive system. Back in the monastery's kitchen, it was already apparent from the way he casually cleared out the bread that was hard as rock (usually eaten with sauce or gravy).

"Yes yes, now this is what I call being alive!"

The young man smiled as he exclaimed.

A cheerful and delightful smile, but also incredible in the way it felt like a monster's.

"By the way, we still have not asked for your name yet, right?"

Liliana's question made him pause in his conquest of food.

"...Name?"

"Yes, having been edified by Saint Raffaello, you must also be a knight, right? Next comes the most important question, that great person — the respected master who instructed you, could you tell us the location of her residence?"

"Master? Residence?"

"Yes, we must meet Saint Raffaello no matter what!"

Liliana questioned with great intensity of emotion. What kind of answer was she going to receive?

Erica shrugged sarcastically beside her.

"Saint Raffaello... The name seems kind of familiar. Was this person really my master? Then what about my own name eh, name... name, hmm."

The young man spoke rather intriguing words, and began to enter deep thought with a frown.

"Please do not joke around. You cannot mean to say you have even forgotten your own name?"

"Hmm, that does seem to be the case."

The young man answered in earnest in response to Liliana's interrogation.

"I think I've lost my memory. I can't recall my name or what I've been doing lately. What's this? My memories of what I did in this neighborhood are so vague."

In the end, the restaurant conversation concluded with nothing achieved, except for treating the young man to a sumptuous meal.

"Thank you all! May God be with you!"

Thus, the young man shamelessly walked away.

Treated to a meal by two twelve-year-old girls, that was all he expressed.

It was now readily apparent why the monk had been repeating comments like "idiot" and "unbelievable fellow." His personality was way too shameless.

"...Erica, you were uncharacteristically reticent just now, what is going on in your mind?"

Outside the restaurant, the young man had departed with footsteps like the wind.

Watching him leave, Liliana questioned Erica.

"Oh? Lily noticed?"

"Of course, you could not possibly let a caught fish go so easily without doing anything. Just now you hardly said a word, and when that man finished eating, all you did was watch, right?"

Erica smiled in response to her childhood friend's accusation.

As expected of my rival, she discerned my true intentions without fail.

"Hey, do you still remember how I excused myself for a brief moment during the meal?"

"Ah, did you do something bad during that time?"

While the young man was focused entirely on eating, Erica had randomly excused herself at one point.

"Based on the result, the answer is no. I was hiding far in the distance, casting the magic of [Sleeping Powder] on that glutton."

Exactly as the name implied, this was magic for making someone fall asleep.

Though very versatile in its wide-ranging applications, this magic had no effect if the target was wary in any way. Even ordinary people would recover swiftly after feeling sleepy.

However, there should be no problem against someone delightfully stuffing his face in such a state.

"In such an unwary state, he should have simply gone to sleep? I was thinking it would be acceptable as long as we obtain the information we need, even if it meant using hypnosis to rob his will. Given such a strange personality, getting things directly would be a lot faster than trying to have a serious conversation."

"Flawlessly decisive and merciless as ever. But the plan failed."

"Yes. It's still unclear, but he deflected my spell perfectly."

"Counter magic or a protection barrier... which one was it?"

"Completely unknown. However, the esteemed monk did say very clearly that he was 'a complete failure,' so he should have zero disposition towards magic. But for Erica Blandelli's spell to have no effect..."

"Could the idiotic attitude be just an act?"

"In that case, he must be a real sly old fox. He is serious trouble if he can hide things so well."

Even at the tender age of twelve, Erica had great confidence in her ability to judge people.

However, the encounter with the young man had shaken this confidence. The man judged as an "idiot" by the monk who should be highly experienced, having met so many knights.

Erica could not believe the young man had the ability to "retract his talons like an eagle."

On the other hand, he was able to foil Erica's plan despite her beliefs.

"So Erica, how shall we obtain tangible information from him?"

"Now it's your turn to shine, Lily. Didn't you master the [Witch's Eye] a month ago?"

"You actually want me to track down that man using the [Witch's Eye]?"

Of course. As Erica nodded, Lily looked up into the sky.

"Using clairvoyance for the despicable act of following someone in secret?"

"There are other vision-enhancing spells for long range recon... But none are as good as the Witch's Eye. Now is the perfect opportunity to make good use of it."

Only those with a witch's disposition were able to use witchcraft.

The Witch's Eye allowed one's sense of sight to travel afar and move around freely. Other lineages of magic also had similar spells but none of them could offer clairvoyance that moved as rapidly as the Witch's Eye. This spell was surprisingly useful for tailing someone.

Erica borrowed a large basin from the restaurant and filled it with water.

This restaurant and bar also had open air tables out front.

That was where the two of them sat after setting down the borrowed basin. After sitting properly at the table, Liliana closed her eyes and released the Witch's Eye.

Soon after, the young man's image appeared on the surface of the water in the basin.

The man seemed to be casually chatting away with an older man with great enthusiasm. They seemed to have just met but they had their arms on each other's shoulder, and were so familiar that it seemed like they were longtime friends.

The young man kept repeating certain words as if pleading for something. The man immediately laughed in response and motioned for him to follow.

Then the two of them got in a car and left.

"Lily, check out where they are going."

A witch's clairvoyant [Witch's Eye] was even able to keep up with the speed of a car.

Liliana had already anticipated such an order.

"Understood. But how are we going to get there?"

"Relax. I, Erica Blandelli, can't possibly fail to achieve the same task as that man, right?"

Erica declared with immense pride.

Part 4

San Gimignano's streets dated all the way back to the Middle Ages and were classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

A total of fourteen towers had been built all over the town during the Middle Ages.

Situated close to Florence, it was less than an hour away by car. The olden City of Flowers, Florence, and the Eternal City, Rome, were both important urban centers that brought exceptional prosperity to their surroundings.

Nowadays, historical buildings were fully put to use as tourist attractions.

And so, the self-proclaimed amnesiac young man hitchhiked his way to this town.

"So Lily, let's find the guy immediately, you haven't lost his trail , right?"

"Ah, no problem... That man suddenly got a lift. He should not be going sightseeing, so what is he doing exactly?"

At the entrance to the town was the Porta San Giovanni.

Built in the thirteenth century, these gates had great historical significance.

Standing before this structure, the two knights were whispering to each other.

Liliana had been keeping her eyes tightly shut all this time starting from the restaurant at the last village. When using the Witch's Eye, her own eyes must be kept closed.

Erica skillfully guided and protected her childhood friend in this state as they went on their way.

Following the young man's lead, she chanced upon an idle-looking older man and pleaded for a ride.

(This kind of idle older men seemed to be unexpectedly common in the Italian countryside. As if on duty, these men would chat and flirt with young ladies on first sight regardless of whether they were local Italians or foreign tourists. Having a day job would be a hindrance to such activities.)

Chatting amiably with the older man in the car helped add liveliness to the brief journey.

Erica explained Liliana's closed-eye and silent condition with an excuse of "not feeling well."

With that, Erica and Liliana easily followed in the young man's footsteps.

"—What!? What on earth is that man trying to do!?"

Liliana suddenly yelled out, opening her eyes that she had been keeping shut.

"What is it, Lily? Something unusual happened?"

"Ah, that man casually climbed to the top of a tower and was looking around... And suddenly, the Witch's Eye was nullified."

"Counter magic? Or is it that [Fortune's Blessing] used by fairy doctors?"

"Intuition tells me that it is neither. Very likely it is not regular magic... More like something used by fairies, demonic deities or the like. Something that felt like magical and spirit power. In the end, all I saw was the man lightly waving his right hand—"

Erica stared with her eyes wide open as a result of Liliana's explanation.

The young man known as the idiot, did have a hidden trump card after all.

"Though this matter is rather concerning, picking up his trail again is our first priority. Lily, let's hurry to where he is! You know the place, right?"

"Ah, it is that plaza over there. Follow me!"

Using the Witch's Eye would likely have the same result again, so it was not a solution.

Liliana started running first, with Erica following behind.

San Gimignano's streets were built on a hill. The land got steeper the closer to town centre, and the sloped path extended uphill.

Even so, the two of them ran effortlessly and passed pedestrians without getting out of breath.

The place they reached was — a plaza with a great church.

It was natural to find solemn holy sanctums in Italian towns of sufficient scale.

Important facilities and tourist attractions targeted towards foreigners were bound to be found at the town center. Located at San Gimignano's Piazza del Duomo was the Palazzo Communale, the seat of civic authority and museum whose style of architecture dates back to medieval times.

Furthermore, seven of the town's iconic towers were located here.

It was a must-see for tourists to ascend one of these towers to admire the view of the San Gimignano's immediate surroundings.

The young man happened to be exiting a tower. Erica and Liliana nodded at each other and approached him.

"You really did something out of line! Did you recover your memory!?"

"...Ah. You're the girls just now called... whatever."

The young man turned to face Erica with an indifferent expression as she called to him. It was shocking how badly he failed at remembering anyone's name after all this time.

Erica and Liliana were beautiful girls who should have left deep impressions. People who remembered their names and faces would vastly outnumber those who forgot them completely —

"Please allow me to ask a question, Mr. Amnesiac. Why do you seem to be trying to avoid bringing us to meet Saint Raffaello? Are you facing some sort of difficulty? ...Or could it be, that you don't want us to obtain the twin swords?"

A rather instigating query.

Earlier at the restaurant, Erica and Liliana had not explained their purpose.

However, at that time the two young knights had expressed their wish to meet Saint Raffaello. If the young man was really her disciple then he should have easily figured out their reason for wanting to meet her.

So he must be playing dumb and deliberately withholding clues —

"Based on what your suspicious behavior indicates, is that not the most plausible conclusion? Are you really wandering around because you are trying to find Saint Raffaello's residence?"

However, if he really did not know magic then they needed to change their approach.

If he is like that then things could only be decided by a direct frontal confrontation. Though Erica was a quick-witted girl well-versed in strategy, ultimately, she had the heart of a soldier who loved a good frontal charge.

However, this frontal confrontation did not lead to any dramatic result.

"No no, there seems to be a misunderstanding. I really can't remember who that Saint whatever person is... Ah, wait a minute, somehow hearing that name makes me think of a horse's tail."

The young man spoke as he racked his brains. A horse's tail?

Erica frowned in response to this cavalier attitude that seemed to be making fun of her. Liliana interrupted and said:

"So why did you come to this town? You lost your memory, right?"

"Hmm, for some reason, I have a strong feeling that this town with the many towers is the place where I will meet the one I want to meet. That's why I asked that acquaintance if he knew a place like that and begged him to take me here..."

The young man looked around at the medieval streets with a nostalgic expression.

"And then, it really did feel familiar, so I tried going somewhere higher, and then something caught my attention."

Flawlessly acting the fool all this time, the man finally made a noteworthy comment.

Faced with this situation, Erica readied her stance. Was this a trap? Was he trying to lead her and Liliana into a mistaken direction?

"Hey you two, would you mind coming along with me? If I am really related to the person you seek, then it should be easier to find clues about that person, right?"

Unexpectedly, the young man was asking for more favors.

"What an incomprehensible request...?"

Faced with Liliana's surprise, the young man responded with a very serious expression.

"Because just now when I bought the ticket to the tower I became completely penniless. And that was because I was a little short and begged the older lady for a discount of 1 Euro. That is why I need friends who can help me with further travels!"

Come to think of it, San Gimignano was a tourist center. Though there were many towers and museums, they more or less all charged entrance fees.

(By the way, in various streets, even public facilities had times when entrance fees were required.)

Faced with this spontaneous request, Erica shook her head in vexation, caught in a quandary.

Drawing her lips close to Liliana's ear, they began to discuss in whispers.

(...Hey Lily, what do think of this man? Is he the "sly old fox skillfully playing dumb" we thought earlier, or the apparent " complete fool in appearance and essence" we see now?)

(What a strange experience. Actually, I am beginning to suspect the latter too.)

Rare it may be, but Liliana also agreed with Erica's assessment.

(Well, there still are many suspicious points, but the opportunity should not be given up.)

(Right, as the saying goes — nothing ventured, nothing gained.)

In the worst case scenario, if this guy really was an unforgivable idiot, then he would just muddle through no matter what.

Thus the girls reached a consensus, aiming for venturous gains.

"Understood. So, Mr. Amnesiac, let us travel together then. Take us to the place which caught your attention."

"Of course! Let's go over there?"

"Right, by the way, there is something I need to confirm. Just now you discovered my Witch's Eye and dispelled it so splendidly . How did you do it?"

Liliana slowly phrased her question to the young man who was nodding away in response to Erica.

That's right, how could the young man who was supposed to be a complete failure in magic use an ultimate skill like that? This mystery must be cleared up no matter what.

"Ah, I just felt a kind of uneasiness like being watched. So it was you? I didn't use a spell though. All I did was throw this at it."

The young man took out a fork from his pocket.

A completely unremarkable piece of cutlery. Colored silver, it was most likely stainless steel.

"Actually, what I threw was the knife I secretly took along with this fork. Not for any particular reason, but only because I thought it'd be fun to play with back at the restaurant."

Now that it was mentioned, the fork did look familiar.

However, knives and forks casually taken from dinner tables should not have antimagic effects.

Erica questioned acutely.

"So you mean you infused magic into the knife to neutralize other spells?"

"No no, I was just wondering if that spell could be easily sliced through. I suck too much at magic and didn't do anything complicated. Hmm, really, all I did was to try cutting it."

Was this another instance of perfect acting from the young man ?

Or was his explanation not clear enough? Erica sighed.

It was a first time for her to be completely unsure of a man's character. Despite having absolute confidence in her grasp of social and interpersonal relations, Erica still had yet to find the proper reins to keep this man under control.

Amazed and impressed by the young man, Erica and Liliana signaled each other through their eyes.

The amnesiac young man walked along the open streets.

Going in the direction of some eateries and shops, he suddenly stopped and turned his gaze to one of the shops selling local souvenirs.

"This is the shop that 'caught your attention'?"

"Nope, but I saw something else... I'll just be a moment!"

The young man dove straight into the shop immediately after answering Liliana's question.

Helplessly, the two girls followed after him.

This was a shop selling typical souvenirs such as folk works of art and artistic postcards.

Neither Erica nor Liliana had any particular interest in enjoying this kind of well-stocked souvenir shop.

As the two browsed the shop with disinterest, they found the young man going "ahah, just as expected!" with his eyes shining brightly.

He was in a corner of the shop where many weapons were hung on the wall.

Long swords, short swords, shields, battle axes, bows and arrows, etc—

There were all sorts of classic weapons from the medieval battlefield. However, all were merely replicas created as souvenirs. They even offered Japanese swords, further proof of selling out to commercialism.

"This one this one, I really like this!"

The young man was holding a long sword.

Even though it was obviously a replica, the craftsmanship was very good.

When forging a real sword, molten steel was first poured into a mold. After cooling down, the blade portion was polished and sharpened.

This replica simply lacked the sharpening stage.

Hence, it was identical to the real thing in both weight and shape. Not bad at all.

"...Isn't this just a fake? I don't think it will be useful to you."

Erica commented coldly as Liliana nodded in agreement beside her.

However, the amnesiac young man shook his head.

"That's not right. Come to think of it, for swords there's no such thing as real or fake, only skilled or unskilled — only the user's skill matters. If wielded by a true master, even a fake sword can cut like a peerless treasure. If used by a clumsy rookie, even the strongest magic sword would be no different from a fishing rod."

He proceeded to take out the restaurant fork from just now.

"Taken to the extreme, a swordsman's mission is to be able to use any ordinary weapon as if it was King Arthur's Excalibur.

Whether the weapon in hand is the strongest magic sword or an oaken branch, a saber or a fork, all should be the same. You fail if you can't use it well enough."

"That's just idealism. If you're going to use a weapon on the battlefield, of course you should use the best possible."

In terms of the pursuit of skill, the young man's perspective did carry some truth.

Erica played devil's advocate even though she agreed in principle.

There existed exceptional masters who could obtain splendid victory against lance-wielding knights with nothing but a short blade, or otherworldly martial artists who could dominate sword users with their bare fists —

But those who possessed such divine skills were extremely rare.

Erica's Uncle Paolo Blandelli and Saint Raffaello were probably the few exceptions.

However, this did not mean they could ignore the quality of their weapons. After all, a personal weapon was a helper, an important partner needed to resist and destroy enemies.

"Well, that's good enough for little kids like you. Trying to do difficult things before you are mature enough would not work anyway. However, once you grow up into adults with clear judgment like me, you will see the failure in your ways."

The young man spoke rather unhappily for once. However, the way he stared at the sword on the wall was like a child in poverty looking wistfully at a little trumpet in a shop window.

Wanting badly but unable to buy.

"...So, what exactly do you wish to do about this sword, Mr. Adult?"

Greatly surprised, Liliana spoke in a rare moment of sarcasm. The young man looked back at the girls with a smile from the heart.

"No, this is exactly the time when an adult's power is needed. — Mr. Shopkeeper, may I ask, does this shop allow temporary unpaid bills? Eh, guarantors? Credit cards? Loans? No no, I'm not talking about those warmthless consumer terms of modern society. I want something that can bring out miraculous connections between people, warming people's hearts or something like that..."

No wallet, personal identification, prepaid funds or guarantors.

Faced with such a shameless young man, the young shopkeeper of the souvenir store refused in shock. However, the young man continued to plead repeatedly like a spoiled child.

In the end, Erica and Liliana settled the matter of the sword by paying for him.

"Thank you so much for buying the sword!"

The young man grinned from ear to ear as he walked ahead, embracing the replica sword from the souvenir shop that was wrapped in a rag.

Erica and Liliana secretly whispered to each other as they followed behind him.

"Well, for something of that price..."

"That idiot — no, that man, how far are we going to believe in him..."

Erica could fully understand Liliana's sentiments as she was about to utter the words "shameless idiot."

Regardless, the trio continued on their way.

Leaving the walled city, the wide open Tuscan fields came into view.

Gentle rolling hills. Well-maintained vineyards and olive tree plantations. Modest little huts used by farmers. Sparsely growing trees. Little streams. This was an ancient road that led straight to Rome—

Amongst such scenery were the remains of medieval castles and forts.

The young man made his way towards them. Of course, Erica and Liliana were still following.

"...Hmm, this place really seems familiar after all. Though I have some kind of feeling I suffered a fair bit of hardship here before, but what was it exactly?"

The self-pronounced amnesiac muttered and grumbled to himself.

Erica cared little for his reactions, but suddenly Liliana began to shake and speak quietly with eyes out of focus.

"Ancient knightly skills... Ancient incantations, treasures... Are hidden in this holy sanctum..."

It was spirit vision. Liliana had obtained an oracle.

Those who possessed a witch's disposition would mutter divine oracles on occasion. Erica nodded and immediately walked towards her childhood friend who was both a knight and a witch.

"What did you see through spirit vision, Lily? Does it help our cause?"

"Ah, yes, Erica, this place is where ancient knights frequented. Near their fort — in the depths of the darkness a temple was built. That was the image I saw through spirit vision."

"Interesting words. A temple built in the depths of darkness, intuition would suggest it is underground?"

Erica tried kicking the ground with the tip of her foot.

It would be a good idea to check out the surroundings. Together with Liliana, the two of them began to use investigative magic.

"Sure enough, a hint of remaining magical power can be sensed from straight down in the earth..."

"Yes. It feels a bit suspicious, but we cannot let go of that tiny probability..."

"This place is definitely being concealed by a barrier. This underground temple is most likely a secret holy sanctum."

"The place once visited by Mr. Amnesiac who has connections with Saint Raffaello — anyway, the probability of finding Saint Raffaello here should be quite high."

"Conversely, the probability of Saint Raffaello being the guardian of this place is also..."

Though it was mere speculation, the two of them still exchanged their ideas.

The only thing left to do was to confirm the actual situation. The two girls nodded to each other. This was the tiger's den they must venture into for worthy gains. Now, where should they begin their plan of attack?

They then heard the young man's frivolous voice.

"I should have been doing something here before I lost my memories...? It was definitely the person related to a horse's tail. I want to make contact but I haven't a clue about the telephone number or address... Should I consider something more classic like signal fires or war pigeon services?"

Strange words were being uttered. Naturally, Erica and Liliana ignored them.

Their experience thus far had convinced them that a meaningful discussion between themselves would be more constructive than having an idiotic conversation with the amnesiac young man.

However, this became the precise reason why they missed the critical moment.

As the two engaged in discussion, a horrifying amount of magical power was exploding.

Using an analogy, it would be like a volcano eruption.

Neither Erica nor Liliana had ever experienced magical power erupting in an instant like this.

To make a forced comparison, it would be like having dozens of top ranking magi taking part in a magical ritual of explosive power.

On the other hand, for a single person to use the same kind of spell and gather together such a massive amount of magical power , it would take an inordinate amount of time and effort to prepare. It was not something that could be done in an instant like this.

—What on earth happened?

Erica and Liliana turned back to look at the same time.

They saw the young man making a pose as if swinging his sword towards the heavens. Apparently he had started swinging that replica.

Furthermore, a medieval fort had been split through the middle and the halves had collapsed outwards. It was a medieval structure built out of stone on a hill.

The fort had one level for soldiers to garrison and an upper level for lookout posts. It was a large and impressive historical building.

Just like that, it was sliced into two.

Severed as if a giant sword had been swung down from the heavens—

Collapsing left and right, the stone building materials made a great noise as they hit the ground.

"W-What happened?"

Erica was a girl who always maintained lady-like composure at all times. However, in that moment she was muttering in shock, completely forgetting her usual mannerisms.

"Could it really be that man's doing...?"

Liliana was also stupefied.

This expression was unbecoming for a talented mage and witch who should be better versed in mysterious matters than the average mage.

"Sorry, did I scare you two? Umm, actually I was wondering if this would work like a signal fire to call out people related to this fort."

This frivolous-sounding voice belonged to the amnesiac young man, of course.

Who on earth was this man —!?

Just as the two girls cast a gaze of fear at him for the first time...

A gray horse arrived, galloping across the rolling Tuscan hills. It was a strong, vigorous and fierce-looking horse with a raven-haired beauty sitting upon its saddle. She appeared to be of Latin descent, bearing a resolute expression.

Her black hair was tied back in a ponytail. Or as the words implied, like a horse's tail.

"...I was wondering if it was an invasion started by some association, and who does it turn out to be? Salvatore Doni. Though I suppose our brief contact makes you my unworthy disciple, what on earth is going on here? Depending on circumstances, I may have to cut off your head as compensation."

The black-haired rider declared heroically from atop her horse.

If this was indeed Saint Raffaello, then she must be the exalted paladino — the top swordsman in Europe holding the position of the "Knight of the Holy Grail"!

Part 5

Though supposed to be advanced in age, Saint Raffaello looked completely like someone in her twenties.

Magi whose magical power had reached the purest heights would recover significant youth and vigor. It was said that the effect was particularly potent for women.

Saint Raffaello's heroic and awe-inspiring beauty must have been the blessed result of that effect.

"What's up, Doni? Did you forget my face because of injuries from the beating you took? If that's the case, I won't be surprised at all because it's you."

"...Ah, it's exactly as you say."

The young man named Salvatore Doni replied, undaunted by his master's questioning.

This was a name that Erica had never heard before, even though she had gathered personal profiles on virtually all the top ranking knights across Europe in case it might come in handy. Who on earth could this young man be —?

"To be frank, I do seem to have lost my memory."

"Don't say it like you caught a flu, moron!"

"Well well, don't be angry. This morning when I woke up I found myself sleeping on some unknown country roadside... And then, I was thinking I must do something to recall past events."

Now that it was mentioned, this was the first time for Erica to hear of the past experiences of the young man named Doni.

"Strolling over to the nearby monastery, I heard your name being mentioned. Anyway, making my way through this and that, I finally got here... Seeing you, I finally understand."

The man named Doni smiled. It was a friendly smiling face as radiant as sunshine.

However, a dark shadow seemed to flash across his pupils for an instant.

He was no ordinary person. His body clearly held evidence that he was no common mortal.

"What I needed to do was see you. And if I could fight you then that sense of vagueness would surely go away. That's what I have been feeling, and it's unbearable."

The young man readied the replica sword in at middle level.

It was an ordinary looking stance that felt uninteresting and lacking in splendor.

However, Erica somehow felt a chill when she saw that posture.

If she had to face sword strikes delivered by that ordinary stance, very likely any spell would be sliced apart?

A meaningless notion.

Erica glanced at Liliana beside her. She too, was staring at the man named Doni with her face completely pale.

Perhaps her childhood friend and rival was facing the same fear ? This was a man who was more than a match for the prodigies of Milan, the red and blue young geniuses!

"Indeed, doing this is perfectly within your character. Unilaterally doing as you pleased while muttering to yourself..."

Saint Raffaello grumbled and dismounted.

"Maybe this counts as an acceptable reason? I keep feeling that my sword training has reached an impasse, which is why I want to fight with the strongest swordsman I know, and gain some kind of clue in the process — See, if you think about it this way, everything works out now!"

"You're making things work out too easily! That's why you are the biggest moron! Anyway, something concerns me."

A great sword with a broad blade appeared in Saint Raffaello's hand.

It was summoned by magic. The silver blade gave off a chilling sense of elegance and tenacity, shining brilliantly with power reminiscent of a lion's majesty.

Could this be one of the "Twin Swords of the Lion and the Master Musician"?

"I know you are one of those people for whom words are a waste of time. Salvatore Doni, you are a true genius, a monstrous child of heaven in regard to swords... However, you are not a man who plays games, what new technique have you mastered now?"

Saint Raffaello pointed her sword at the fort that had been split into two.

"This is simply..."

The beautiful paladino shook her head as giving up all hope.

Then she pointed the tip of her sword at Salvatore Doni.

"This reminds me, your stupidity is so great that not even death can cure it. Let's talk using the blades of our swords. Come, you unworthy idiot disciple. It's been a while since I gave you a good loving..."

A rather strange master-disciple conversation.

A formidable battle seemed to be imminent.

For young knights, the opportunity to witness such a battle must have been a chance of a life time. However, Erica Blandelli was not one to be satisfied so easily.

Erica felt her gaze unwittingly drawn by the intensely peculiar personalities of the master-disciple pair.

However, she still had other goals. There was that task she needed to accomplish.

"Please wait a moment, Saint Raffaello! It is a pleasure meeting you for the first time. I am Liliana Kranjcar, knight belonging to the [Bronze Black Cross]. Today I make my visit for the sake of inheriting the famed twin swords in your possession."

Even as Erica recovered her fighting spirit, Liliana was the first to yell out before her.

She got ahead. Oh well, whatever, as befits my rival. She doesn't want to be just a bystander either. In that case, let's fight in cooperation.

For young upstarts like Erica and Liliana, trying to compete against this master-disciple pair required strategy!

"I, Erica Blandelli, have also arrived for the same purpose as Dame Liliana here. So it turns out that Sir Salvatore who came along with us was also looking for Madam Saint Raffaello... Due to Sir Salvatore's vague memories, we still have yet to ascertain the relationship between you two."

Erica spoke as she bowed elegantly.

Grasp the situation as quickly as possible and change from being a bystander to a participant.

"If possible, as your junior I also wish —"

"Pray elucidate the details."

Faced with Liliana and Erica's identical requests, Saint Raffaello sighed.

"Based on your family names, you must be the successors to the Houses of Kranjcar and Blandelli. What a disaster for you to be caught up in this moron's antics... Salvatore Doni is a knight from Siena. Extremely talented with the sword, but a complete failure in magic."

Siena was another ancient city in Tuscany along with Florence and Pisa.

However, it was definitely not a major center in magic.

In Italy, there were a total of seven prestigious magic associations. Rome's [Female Wolf] and [Eagle of the Blue Sky], Turin's [Olden Dame], Florence's [Capital of Lilies], Palermo's [Aegis], and last but not least, Milan's [Copper Black Cross] and [Bronze Black Cross]. Altogether they were known as the "Seven Sisters."

It was common practice for talented young men and women to be recruited and relocated to these prestigious associations.

For example, the one who got along poorly with Erica, Gennaro Gantz, came to Milan from Reggio Calabria a few years ago. All things said, "a knight from Siena" implied that this young man named Doni had never brushed shoulders with elites.

"This fellow came to me a year ago and said 'please teach me a bit of swordsmanship.' I discovered that he did have some good qualities despite being an idiot, so I instructed him for a while. But then he disappeared after merely a month."

The young man was ruefully scratching his head in response to her reproach.

"Hmm... I can't really remember. Even if you glare at me with such scary eyes..."

"What a troublesome fool. Anyway, you are the fellow with poor intellect, rude manners, and always playing little tricks. The only things you can remember are those related to martial arts. All it took was a month for you to memorize my techniques."

Was this the result of his inborn talent?

Such arrogance was only permitted for those born with outstanding aptitude. Furthermore, Saint Raffaello had declared in no uncertain terms that he was a "genius."

"Did we have that kind of relationship...? Well, anyway, that has little to do with our meeting here now."

The genius swordsman, who transcended Erica and Liliana's imaginations, spoke to them with a knowing smile.

"Could you two back off for a while? I should be done in a bit. Anyway, sorry!"

The young man signaled with his eyes.

Immediately, Doni's right arm began shining with a bright silver luster. He stabbed the replica sword into the ground and simply pulled it out again.

— This resulted in a slash that split the earth apart.

The ground beneath Erica and Liliana collapsed and split open. Like the medieval fort just now, the ground was cleanly cut into two.

The two surprised girls fell down into the depths of the earth. Due to the ground collapsing from the young man's "slash," the girls were swept underground together with the debris.

Did Salvatore Doni actually overhear Erica and Liliana's speculation about "something underground"?

Which is why he forced the two of them down there to prevent them from interfering in his fight? For his own purpose.

A fool in appearance but quite crafty in reality — from this, Erica and Liliana caught sight of another aspect of the young man described by Saint Raffaello.

"As expected... It's still you after all."

The paladino named Saint Raffaello murmured to herself.

Salvatore Doni's terrifying ability. Swinging the replica sword with the brilliantly shining silver arm, the earth was split apart together along with the underground church.

She recognized it for what it was.

During the stage in life when she fought under the title of Saint Raffaello, she had often witnessed many examples of such ultimate power.

Dejanstahl Voban's manipulation of storms, the army of the dead under his command, and vast empty wastelands the result of incineration by hellfire.

Beautiful Cult Leader Luo Hao's unparalleled unarmed might, singing songs of destruction, scattering otherworldly flowers across the mortal realm.

Graceful Madame Aisha's summoning of eternal spring and endless winter.

And now, the "King of Swords" who slices through all existence was born —!

"Ahahahahaha! Thanks to this blessing of longevity, even though an unworthy disciple, I now witness the birth of Epimetheus' illegitimate child from my lineage! What a surprise!"

Saint Raffaello cried out to the silver-armed swordsman.

"Hey, idiot disciple, what were you doing before your poor little mind lost its memory?"

"Hmm... I feel like I was fighting someone somewhere, but I can't recall the details."

Doni readied the fake sword as he spoke.

Saint Raffaello scoffed at this silly answer.

"You even forgot how things happened, what a useless idiot disciple. Well then, you shall answer with your body... Through actual combat, show me the sword skills of the man who defeated a god!"

The great silver sword — the magical Cuore di Leone came swinging.

This was a strike from one of the twin swords. Its name implied "soul of the lion." This steel embodied unrelenting valor and carried the attribute of indestructibility.

Doni's silver arm dispelled its brilliance before the magic sword of the lion.

"Eh, you're not going use your authority? Planning on going easy on a human like me? How admirable!"

"Authorities, whatever, I don't know anything about that. But it's not a battle of sword skills if I use that arm, so it would be meaningless."

Using this exchange of dialogue as the signal to begin, the two of them simultaneously attacked with their swords.

Saint Raffaello swung Cuore di Leone upwards in a massive arc , while Doni slashed with lightning speed along the central approach.

Clang! A direct frontal clash.

Sword struck sword intensely, and like that the blades slowly inched towards their opponents.

Had these been ordinary swords, such a violent direct clash would likely snap the blades outright.

For Cuore di Leone, such concerns would have been redundant. Its pliable structure would not fracture under this level of stress, and even in the off chance that it did break, it could mend itself immediately.

On the other hand, Doni was using a mere fake sword. As they pressed their blades against each other, delighted smiles surfaced on the faces of both swordsmen.

Display your skills through fierce attacks like this — Saint Raffaello invited with her eyes and Doni nodded lightly in response.

The two of them separated their swords and stepped back.

One side would strike with the sword, and the other would defend.

One side would make a sudden thrust and the other would deflect or guard in response.

The two swords clashed and repelled each other repeatedly, sending sparks flying, trying to prove their superiority.

The root of this battle was a primal competitive urge.

Whose sword was stronger, faster, sharper —

A competition in all such aspects.

In terms of "strength" and "gentleness," simply stated, this was a duel of "strength."

On the other hand, this battle was obviously not limited to swordsmanship. Saint Raffaello in particular, was a master of knightly techniques that combined magic and swordsmanship in battle —

"O Steel of the lion, the king of swords that has cut down thousands of armored foes!"

Cuore di Leone attacked in conjunction with spell words.

Her beloved sword was infused with iron alchemy that enhanced its sharpness. Were Doni to take the strike head on like just now, his fake sword would be split into two!

Doni suppressed the attack by exhibiting a technique best described as "gentle."

Saint Raffaello swung Cuore di Leone down with great force.

The fake sword pressed itself against the body of the opponent's blade — rather, they were entangled. The fake sword was now acting like a steel snake.

Cuore di Leone, which should have sliced Doni apart, was deflected off course.

The fake sword tangled itself around Cuore di Leone like a snake, preventing it from being swung freely.

— Against an opponent's force of 100, one shall use a force of 10 to absorb its power, the way cotton soaks up water, thereby blocking it, defending.

A technique of this sort was known as the "dissipating force" amongst Chinese martial artists.

Simply stated, it was the concept of neutralizing unyielding " strong" force with "gentleness."

At this time, Salvatore Doni's mind and body had entered a heightened state of intense clarity.

Pressing his sword tightly against Saint Raffaello's blade, he perturbed his master's movements by using the fake sword like a snake to shift her aim, neutralizing the slicing attacks.

Rather than focusing on dodging the enemy's attacks, this was active defense performed with initiative, seeking to discover openings in the opponent's sword techniques —

Using "gentleness," Doni was able to overwhelm Cuore di Leone.

"Not bad, as expected!"

Saint Raffaello laughed. Was this enough to seal the lion?

Using gentle strength to carry out techniques uniting the strong with the gentle was one of the most wondrous pinnacles of martial achievement. But what about using gentle force to counter gentle force?

Saint Raffaello relaxed her body as if it were made of cotton. She began to control the motions of her sword and her entire body like a snake, a leech, or like cotton.

Compared to the fake sword moving under Doni's control, the magic sword of the lion flowed gently with greater softness. Its motions were far more elegant and soothing in comparison.

The sword was being swung with elegance as if the renowned Renaissance master Raphael was moving his paintbrush —

Indeed, Salvatore Doni was a genius and a blessed child of heaven in his disposition towards swords.

However, Saint Raffaello was just as talented. Though they may be similarly gifted in nature, the difference in accumulated experience was decidedly vast. Perhaps the unworthy disciple had approached the master's skill with the "strong" sword, but clearly he had yet to master the "gentle"—

Saint Raffaello casually retracted the lion's sword from entanglement from Doni's snake-like sword.

And just as casually, she resumed with a slashing attack.

Whenever the elderly master delivered a smooth and unhurried blow, no impetuous youngster had ever been able to evade... This was one of many legends passed down in martial circles. Masters who had reached such heights were virtually unheard of.

But of course, it would be most redundant to state that it was perfectly possible for Saint Raffaello!

What are you going to do, unworthy disciple!?

Doni's right arm proceeded to shine brightly with a silver luster — is he really activating his authority?

The power to slice apart the ancient fort along with the very earth!? Isn't he contradicting his prior statement of "that isn't sword skills"?!

The shock and surprise stiffened her muscles, causing Saint Raffaello's sword to delay slightly. The slowly moving sword became even more languid in its motion.

Taking advantage of this opening, Doni attacked at once, charging with his body!

The magic sword of the lion was originally going to split Doni in half starting with his head.

However, it only managed to slice off a bit of his scalp, and Doni's body continued to crash towards her.

What a decisive and courageous tackle. Rather than swordfighting it was more like a rugby move. Saint Raffaello dodged by taking a brisk step to the side. Thanks to that, the massive idiot's head was not split open.

Doni's arm no longer flashed with silver light. It was a feint for he had no intention of using his authority.

"Y-You damn brat! You social misfit of a human failure! Even so , you went further and abused a swordsman's honor, promising not to use *that arm*!"

"But all I did was show it. I didn't actually use it, right?"

Saint Raffaello was furious, while Doni was unrepentant.

The duel between masters of the sword had become an argument like squabbling children.

"Hmph, if that's what you want, I will use all of my weapons."

Saint Raffaello dispelled the lion's magic sword. As its replacement, she summoned the magic sword of the master musician — Il Maestro!

It was a weapon with a blade like a saber's fitted onto a long shaft like a spear. Resembling a glaive or the Japanese naginata, it was the other of the twin swords. Its name meant "The Master."

The creator of mysterious beauty, this steel was renowned for playing wondrous music, as hidden within it was the spiritual power of the magic melody.

Saint Raffaello effortlessly swung Il Maestro.

The sound of slicing wind was heard as it slashed at Doni.

The motion was as fast as a chilly breeze blowing lightly across highlands.

Furthermore, Il Maestro's slashing attack was accompanied by the playing of a tempting magic melody.

From the steel of the master musician came mysterious tones, which caused listening opponents to lose concentration and be overcome with sleepiness, thereby producing openings. This was Saint Raffaello's prided secret technique that had placed many a foe at her mercy.

If Cuore di Leone was the "strong" sword then Il Maestro was the "gentle" magic sword.

However, the magic melody did not work against Doni. Like ocean waves crashing against rocks on the shore, all bewitching effects were deflected completely.

As befitted the god-slaying man!

Magic was ineffective against a god-slayer after all. In that case, one must focus on martial arts!

Saint Raffaello began to swing Il Maestro even faster.

— In close-quarter combat, absolute advantage was held by the one with greater control over their weapon. No matter what, seizing initiative was imperative.

Of course, there was also the tactic of crashing into the enemy's bosom to enter contact range.

However, there was no way Saint Raffaello would let someone beneath her like Doni do that.

Il Maestro attacked mercilessly in its glaive-like form.

Horizontal slash followed horizontal slash. From left to right, diagonally up, diagonally down, straight up, straight down, slashing attacks were sent from all angles. Sometimes the blade was even thrust forward in a straight line.

Without pausing for a single instant, the series of continuous attacks were like a storm of steel.

Doni desperately tried to overcome the disadvantageous shift in the tide of battle, using his sword to defend against Il Maestro's thrusts and slashes. Defend, defend, defend!

However, Saint Raffaello suddenly changed her rhythm of attack.

Twirling around the long-shafted Il Maestro, she made use of the opposite end of the blade, or in other words, the pommel to strike Doni. This was the critical hit.

Having grown accustomed to the previous attack rhythm, Doni was struck squarely in the temple by the wooden shaft.

Hit by an impact equivalent to a splendid hook from a boxer, Doni's body began to sway. His knees hit the ground and his eyes lost focus.

Unconscious, eh? However, one cannot be careless until a decisive strike lands with absolute certainty.

Saint Raffaello began to swing Il Maestro once again.

Part 6

Tracing back to earlier events, Erica and Liliana had just fallen into a dark place underground together with a large amount of debris.

After hitting the floor, Erica endured the pain and got up.

Feeling the ground beneath her feet, it felt like clay tiles which are much softer compared to hard slabs of stone or concrete.

Her body did not hurt too much, most likely due to the clay tiles absorbing part of the impact.

Relieved, Erica snapped her fingers to perform a [Ghostfire] spell.

Four palm-sized blue flames appeared In Erica's surroundings. Beside her, Liliana also got up onto her feet.

"...As expected, this looks like an underground temple."

"Yes. Originally this place was blocked off by a powerful barrier , preventing normal entry into the grounds."

The two of them surveyed their surroundings.

The temple was rather spacious — big enough to hold a football match.

Going forward, there was an altar in the depths of this church.

At the back of the altar was a figure of Jesus Christ on the crucifix.

Behind the sculpture was some kind of massive face. It was the demonic deity Baphomet worshiped by the Knights Templar during the Middle Ages.

"Since a depiction of Baphomet is here, it must have been constructed during the Middle Ages."

"Yes. The worship of Baphomet in lineages descending from the Knights Templar was something that was gradually lost in contemporary times."

Erica and Liliana looked upwards.

The ceiling was roughly ten-odd meters above the floor. A massive crack crossed the ceiling, and the debris fallen from above had buried roughly a quarter of the underground church.

"Lily, by your estimates, how deep are we?"

"An accurate measure would be impossible of course. A witch's intuition tells me this should be quite deep. It could very well be equivalent to four or five floors underground."

Magi with a witch's disposition were particularly favored by the earth.

Erica shrugged in response to Liliana's answer.

"Building such a church must have required significant resources. I fear this place was built by our predecessors the Knights Templar themselves, or a successor of direct lineage."

Erica speculated as she walked about, examining the place.

One of the reasons why the Knights Templar went into decline was their indulgence in developing economic power which ran counter to orthodox Christian ideology.

The Knights Templar undertook operations that were essentially finance.

Redeemable deposits, loans and financing. Managing the funds of pilgrims setting off for Jerusalem. Selecting over nine thousand knights from various European orders to come to the Middle East. They also loaned cash and even provided aid to government finances. The Knights Templar acted as a prototype of modern banking.

"This must have been an important holy sanctum once. Which is why Saint Raffaello has been living in seclusion watching over it... By the way, Lily, what's this?"

Erica discovered a book lying at the foot of the sculpture of Christ.

The book was rather large in size. The width of the cover was roughly the length from Erica's elbow to her fingertips while its height was as tall as Erica's upper torso.

Erica slowly approached this massive book.

"W-Wait a minute, Erica. I can feel an aura from that book, it could very well be a sacred treasure with significant history!? Do not recklessly touch something so dangerous!"

"...Your witch's intuition again, right? I am very intrigued."

Chirping away like a little bird, Erica completely ignored Liliana's warnings.

Approaching the mysterious book, Erica gazed unerringly at the cover. Titled "The Book in Praise of David's Great Works," the book was written in ancient Greek.

Erica felt herself shudder instinctively. For the grimoire that all knights sought in their dreams to be encountered like this...

"Too reckless, Erica Blandelli! Know your plaaaace!"

Liliana panted as she ran over to catch up.

It was only natural. The childhood friend and rival was not a girl who would fail to recognize the value of this book.

"Correction. It is very likely that Saint Raffaello went into seclusion for the purpose of guarding this grimoire. That must be why this underground church with a sturdy barrier was chosen. For the sake of safeguarding battle magic of the ancient sages —"

The one who hid this grimoire was most probably Saint Raffaello. Also, there was Liliana's oracle.

Combining these facts, Erica concluded that it was highly unlikely for this grimoire to be fake.

—"The Book in Praise of David's Great Works"!

It held incomparable attraction for magi seeking the pinnacle of the way of the knight.

For example, there were the [Spell Words of David]. An ancient and powerful curse that was said to be strong enough to cause injury to Heretic Gods. Or the [Song of Smiting], the sacred hymn of massacre that destroyed the tragic city of Jericho, causing the Midian kings and people to be annihilated from the face of the earth —

"Hey Lily, I have a suggestion..."

Erica's voice sounded uncharacteristically like a cat's.

Failure was unacceptable. Throughout her entire life, Erica had managed to deceive Liliana Kranjcar countless times, but nevertheless, the success rate was not 100%.

One must be cautious and avoid setting off the silver-haired childhood friend's sense of justice.

On the other hand, such worries might have been redundant.

After all, Liliana was staring at the grimoire like a poor child gazing wistfully at a little trumpet, or more accurately, like Salvatore Doni salivating over a sword!

Salvatore Doni had just been struck soundly in the temple by Saint Raffaello.

It was a heavy blow. His brain felt like it was vibrating, and his consciousness was slipping. His knees were wobbling and his body was losing balance and about to collapse.

However, this painful blow managed to awaken something in his mind.

—Aaah, it's all coming back.

Doni found his memories from the past month surfacing nonstop in his mind.

It must have been a museum in Turkey where his body was possessed by the divine spirit of Saint George. Originally, he had been hired as a bodyguard in Rome's Chinatown by an antiques dealer he was acquainted with. Then a whole lot happened after that.

Controlled by the divine spirit, he went overseas to Ireland, spending his days searching for deities and exterminating them.

Finally, he discovered the gates of the Fairy Realm which led to the Netherworld. Nuadha, the king of the Tuatha Dé Danann (Irish deities, basically), manifested there and began to duel one on one against Saint George.

In the end, only Saint George's divine spirit was destroyed and Doni regained his freedom. After that, Doni was certain that he had challenged Nuadha to a duel —

"Traveling back to Italy through the Netherworld, I arrived at that village, was that what happened...?"

Doni shook his head in a daze and nodded. After ending the battle with the god and on the verge of death, there was an impression of speaking to a female somewhere.

'Your memories will be in chaos for a short while after returning to the real world. Though becoming a god-slayer results in rebirth, incompetent magi will receive brain damage from the strain of staying in the Boundary of Life and Immortality for too long. If that happens, just find someone to give you a good smack on the head!"

It sounded like advice from a very frivolous young girl...

Anyway, Doni's memory had recovered.

Only a fraction of a second had passed since being struck by Saint Raffaello. During this time, his master had swung Il Maestro over his head, and was intent on delivering the finishing blow —!

Defense and counterattack was necessary.

Salvatore Doni had already mastered thousands of techniques that could be used in this situation. Using this endless variety of ever-changing sword styles, he will face his former teacher!

— However, the techniques surfacing in his mind suddenly all vanished.

— Doni also halted his sword-wielding arm.

The sword dangled limply. Abandoning the offensive and defensive maneuvers that were deemed necessary, the sword only needed to be moved freely by one's heart.

"No good... Did I even forget the most important part?"

He had encountered Nuadha who wielded the undefeated sword. At that time, he had awakened a deep revelation that was close to the true essence of swordsmanship. Right, this was what Salvatore Doni had hoped for from a duel with Saint Raffaello.

"...You, did you recover your memories?"

Saint Raffaello asked. She seemed to have noticed the change in Doni's behavior. Despite having spent only a brief period with him , she was truly the teacher worthy of the paladino title.

"Recovering your memories by smacking your head? What a sloppy little brat..."

Even though she was scolding him, Saint Raffaello's anger seemed to have subsided.

"Almost like changing into an entirely different person... You, brat who loves to show off, finally understood the concept that ' abandoning skills' is also a 'skill,' right?"

"Hmm. Well, that's right I guess. From now on, let's really stick to swords alone."

Doni's sword continued to dangle limply as he responded.

This posture could be described as stanceless, but precisely because it was "nothingness" it was open to infinite changes. Countless variety was not enough, for truly infinite variation lay in modest simplicity, like combining yin and yang, melding contradictory elements completely into one.

Now all that was needed was nothingness in the mind.

Devoid of thought. Cleared of thought and contemplation —

Saint Raffaello made a straight thrust with Il Maestro. Doni remained in his mental state of nothingness, swinging his sword upwards. Were this move to succeed, it would block the strike from below and send Il Maestro flying high up into the air...

Ka! Ching!

The harsh timbre of metal clashing echoed. A conclusion had been reached.

The sword flying high into the air was the fake one — Doni's weapon.

"...Well, let's call it a day. Are you impressed by my greatness?"

"Am I that far away from perfecting it? Sometimes I can use it well but other times it doesn't work."

As his master declared with pride, Doni muttered to himself as he shook his head.

"Purely in regard to swords, it is my victory without a doubt. You are still too lacking in experience... However, as a side note, experiencing a few more battles of this sort will greatly help your training."

Saint Raffaello's advice carried a terrifying sort of certainty.

"That said, had it been a fight to the death, with 99% certainty it would have been your victory. Hey Doni, in that decisive moment, did the thought of "I might die" ever cross your mind?"

"Now that you mention it, never. Why?"

"Sure enough, you're still a moron. You usurped the divine authority to slice through anything — if you really used that then I would have no chance of victory... I am absolutely certain, you really could use that against me without any hesitation."

Criticized by his master, Doni began to pout.

"Hmm, even though I'm just a rookie amongst knights, I intend to keep my promise of 'only swords' no matter what."

"Yeah right! As if one could expect the fair spirit of competition from a fellow who can slay gods!"

Having known quite a few Campiones, the paladino asserted.

"Don't even think you can obtain the secret art of nothingness so easily from the victory over Nuadha. Well then, Doni, if you really want to master the sword skills of nothingness, you must fight enemies of an equal or higher level, and reach the mental realm of serene nothingness in the process. Only then can it become yours as if it were a part of your flesh and blood."

"Enemies of an equal or higher level?"

"Of course. That means gods or your peers, the Campiones."

Thus the "King of Swords," Salvatore Doni, was set loose upon the earth, causing direct and indirect hardship and suffering to countless others as a result of his eccentric behavior.

The culprit who had offered such brilliant advice, frowned and murmured to herself.

"By the way, those Kranjcar and Blandelli girls probably got injured a little. And of all places you could have driven them, you had to pick the worst one! That girl in particular is not an easy one to handle. If only she was the same type as this idiot here!"

"Seems like the battle has ended..."

"Wow. What an amazing fight..."

Having witnessed most of the duel, Erica and Liliana whispered to each other.

The two of them were still in the underground church. Liliana had released the Witch's Eye to scout out the subterranean passage which was as complicated as mountain caves. The observed images were projected onto the surface of magically conjured water.

Completely memorizing the layout, Erica was able to deduce the underground structure.

With that, the two of them were able to find an escape route with shocking speed.

Once the Witch's Eye reached the surface, they were able to observe the deadly duel between Saint Raffaello and the young man named Doni.

Since the spell only enhanced vision, they were unable to catch the dialogue.

Nevertheless, Erica and Liliana were able to fully grasp how amazing the young man named Doni was.

"Despite various concerns, our first priority should be getting back up."

Liliana nodded in agreement with Erica's opinion.

...Two hours later, Saint Raffaello welcomed the two as they reached the surface. Standing slovenly behind the paladino was the young man named Doni, lovingly embracing the fake sword.

"It's been a while, Madam Saint Raffaello, and Sir Salvatore — I express my utmost apologies for failing to greet Your Highness the sixth Campione with timeliness."

Erica bowed with prim and proper etiquette. It was neither yielding subserviently nor lacking in manners.

It was behavior performed with the esteem of the House of Blandelli.

"I believe the birth of Italy's god-slayer is a cause for celebration. We, the [Bronze Black Cross], will surely send our commander-in-chief for a formal greeting in the near future. But for now, please accept my salutations."

Likewise, Liliana also performed a knight's greeting readily.

Truly the awe-inspiring and upfront words of a soldier.

Since the Witch's Eye did not offer sound, they had not heard the conversation between Doni and Saint Raffaello. However, the many clues in the situation were more than enough to ascertain Salvatore Doni's true identity.

"They're talking to you, moron."

"Eh? Why do you have to be so respectful? Ah, you are Elenoa Blindelli and Lilana Kuronikor, right? I just recovered my memory, thank you for everything you've done so far!"

Prompted by his teacher, the young Devil King spoke foolishly.

Better keep a good distance from him, Erica silently vowed to herself.

He looks like an idiot, and does act foolishly after all, but one would never expect him to be a monster.

Getting too close to him will definitely be bad luck!

Thus, it was about time to get going. Erica signaled to Liliana with her eyes.

Bid our leave with proper manners and make a run for it!

"How clever of you to discern Doni's identity without any explanation. However, there are still certain things you overlooked . So you two were able to use the spell of [Transcription] in such short time?"

As Saint Raffaello spoke, the two froze in their tracks.

Amazingly observant. Their respect for their great predecessor grew in leaps and bounds.

...[Transcription] was high level magic that enhanced one's memory for a short period of time, allowing one to memorize read texts. Erica and Liliana had split the duties and memorized half of "The Book in Praise of David's Great Works" each to take back to the surface.

"M-Madam Saint Raffaello, we absolutely did not do this out of disrespect for you. No matter what, no knight can resist that kind of temptation —!"

"Sigh. Fine, I shall let you have this in exchange."

Disregarding Liliana's frantic apology, Saint Raffaello extended an open palm. On it was a key made of iron.

"This is the key to a little church in Florence! Labyrinthian catacombs lie beneath it, guarded by many traps. My armory is there. Take this, go there and pick out what you like!"

Saint Raffaello informed them with an anguished expression.

Eh? The silver-haired childhood friend exclaimed in confusion.

Erica proceeded to nod in agreement at the generous terms offered by Saint Raffaello. Surely, the renowned twin swords, the magic swords of Cuore di Leone and Il Maestro must lie in that armory!

"W-What on earth is going on, Erica?"

"In other words, Madam Saint Raffaello is bestowing the twin swords upon us in exchange for dispelling the [Transcription] spell . I think it was not right for us to harbor such desires, so this is just as well."

"...Hey Master, if you summon the swords now then there's no need to exchange, right?"

"Hmph, that armory has all sorts of devices for repelling invaders, you think it's that easy to get there!? Furthermore, if that girl is skilled enough then she should fight her way in there by all means!"

The paladino retorted childishly at her disciple's question.

Hearing that, Erica proposed cleverly and cautiously:

"I look forward to the trial that awaits me in my quest for outstanding weapons. However, if I may, I wish to make one request to Madam Saint Raffaello."

"Request?"

"Yes, we hope you can grant leniency towards the portions Dame Liliana and I memorized by our own efforts without using spells."

Liliana was speechless at this proposal.

The very first part they read was the portion that could be memorized quickly. This included the [Spell Words of David] left behind by the ancient hero that were powerful enough to cause injury to gods — this was the portion for which Erica was requesting leniency.

Tsk, whatever! Saint Raffaello began to yell as if throwing a tantrum.

"Hey Doni, I'm going to give you a grimoire for safekeeping! Take care of it diligently! Hmm, giving it directly to you makes me feel uneasy, so better find someone trustworthy later! Tsk, I'm not going to take up the role of watching over that book ever again! What a pain!"

"Uh, what are you talking about? I don't quite understand, Master."

Once again, they were at the Porta San Giovanni.

Erica and Liliana had returned to the city gates of San Gimignano.

They had arrived here after handling various matters and bidding farewell to Sir Salvatore and Saint Raffaello.

"Sorry to have you wait, Erica...... What do you think?"

"Oh my, imitating Saint Raffaello's look isn't bad. Rather, it actually suits you quite well."

The two girls had decided to take a break and were having coffee in town.

After borrowing the washroom, Liliana had returned with a new hairstyle.

Her long silver hair was now tied in a ponytail. Witnessing her childhood friend's change in appearance, Erica offered her opinion without reservation.

"Really? Yes, to be honest, I also think it suits me well!"

Liliana nodded with excitement.

Discovering the grimoire was already exciting enough, but encountering her idol seemed to have made her even more high-strung. As preparations before their next adventure, it was not a bad sign.

Erica gazed at the key given by Saint Raffaello.

"So, let's start preparing for the catacombs beneath Florence. Surely we must get our hands on those two magic swords, and let no one in Italy be ignorant of our talent."

"Ah, I hope so... Well, on the other hand."

Liliana nodded then sighed.

"Earning some sort of merit may bring fame, but everything pales in comparison to the shocking news of the birth of a Campione. Who could have expected someone like that to slay a god successfully..."

"Furthermore, I wonder what kind of god did he fight..."

The young man they parted with not too long ago.

Recalling his unprecedented behavior, the two girls were deeply impressed.

...At that moment, Liliana's cellphone began to ring.

"Esteemed Grandfather? Excuse me for a bit, Erica. What is going on? Eh? The Marquis wishes to gather us witches and miko? "

After a brief conversation, Liliana hung up the phone.

Hearing words she could not turn a deaf ear towards, Erica decided to inquire without hesitation.

"What happened? The one you and Grandfather Kranjcar referred to as the Marquis — so it turns out to be related to Marquis Voban?"

"Uh, yes," replied Liliana with a hesitant expression.

"Recently, the Marquis apparently has a need for several dozens of miko. I told Grandfather that I would head over there together with you once we finish things here."

"The Marquis says he needs miko? The intentions of the Great Devil King of the Balkans are certainly difficult to surmise."

Salvatore Doni and Dejanstahl Voban.

The ritual summoning of Siegfried that would become the source of conflict between two Devil Kings. As yet unaware of the causes of that incident, the two girls began to discuss their means of transport towards Florence.

Erica proposed hiring a car and a driver, while Liliana expounded on the virtues of the public bus system's timeliness and cost effectiveness.

Stubbornly refusing to back down, the two of them continued to bicker with great intensity.

Chapter 4 - Black Prince, White Witch, and the Hero's Attendant

Part 1

Cretan legends are a particularly famous category of Greek mythology.

For example, there was the Minotaur, the half-man half-bull monster born from an affair between the queen and a bull.

The Greeks were obliged to regularly offer their young children as sacrifices to this monster imprisoned in an underground labyrinth.

The young warrior Theseus entered the labyrinth in order to slay it —

This is the well-known story of the "Labyrinth of the Minotaur."

In order to imprison the monster, King Minos ordered the construction of a labyrinth. Trapped by a maze of intersecting passages, outsiders were eaten by the monster as soon as they stepped foot into the labyrinth. Later on, Minos ordered King Aegeus to make tribute of seven pairs of youths, male and female, once every nine years to be sent into the labyrinth to be sacrificed as the bull-headed monster's food. The Athenian prince, Theseus, decided to go to Crete to kill the Minotaur in order to save the young men and women of Athens. King Minos' daughter Ariadne fell in love with Theseus and gave him a sharp sword and a ball of yarn. Thanks to these items, Theseus finally killed the Minotaur and escaped the labyrinth with the Athenian youths and Princess Ariadne.

"The key to this myth is the Minotaur born from the queen and the bull's affair."

Alexandre Gascoigne spoke thus. His current location was Cornwall.

Also called the Black Prince Alec, and known as the Nobleman of God Speed. In fact, he was also a [King] widely versed in myths originating from all over the world.

Although he was not an elite mage by training, nevertheless, he still mastered all sorts of spells.

He became a Campione at the age of sixteen.

In the four years after that, he was in conflict with the Witenagemot[18], known as the organization of top experts in the realm of magic. Traveling all over Europe to look for mysterious treasure, he fought against gods and magic associations from all over the world.

Very likely it was during this period that his abilities as a first class mage were gradually honed.

"Ever since ancient times, the bull was a symbol of abundant harvests. Hence, the Cretans equated the bull as being divine. Conversely, this also establishes a parallel interpretation of the queen being a miko."

Perhaps the following was the background prototype for the legend of the Minotaur —

In the early days of the Greek city states, the island of Crete in the neighboring sea had a powerful and flourishing civilization. These islanders would regularly demand the young children of the Greeks as tribute to be sacrificed. These children were live sacrifices to be offered to the island's god of harvests.

The "God of Harvests" that desired young children, was served by the queen who acted as a miko —

"Well, it's not without archaeological basis..."

There was also the Cretan prehistoric civilization: the Minoan ruins where large amounts of human bones were discovered, speculated to be the remains of the people who were offered as live sacrifices.

Alec usually explained these kinds of topics when facing subordinates who had little knowledge of magic.

The association he founded, [Royal Arsenal], recruited all sorts of talent and its ranks not only included powerful magi but also occultists who focused purely on research, commoners who sought revenge against sorcerers for deaths of relatives, and even street hoodlums, con artists and unrepentant thieves. As long as they knew the existence of gods, even ordinary commoners were included.

These were people who hoped to follow Alec and oppose the elite magic associations led by the Witenagemot. Perhaps this was the only point of commonality between the members of [Royal Arsenal].

This was why their levels of competency and expertise were extremely varied.

Hence it was necessary for Alec as their leader to start giving lectures on what magi would consider common sense basics.

Trusted subordinates — especially Sir Iceman, had advised many times that it was not necessary for their commander-in-chief to give lectures personally. However, Alec did not mind looking after his subordinates.

(As a side note, this aspect of his personality had been criticized by the maiden, his eternal rival, as 'cautious and unexpectedly lacking in boldness.' In response, Alec had replied dejectedly that ' providing guidance and education to subordinates is the duty and responsibility of the leader.')

It happened two days before the lecture at the Cornwall stronghold.

A museum situated in a quaint peaceful village... Was the concealed headquarters established by Alec's subordinates where precious foci and treasures acquired from the British Museum and the British Library were housed and displayed, along with mountains of grimoires. These various artifacts were stolen on impulse a year ago when the conflict with the Witenagemot had peaked with great intensity.

But anyway, Alec was currently in the deepest level of a massive labyrinth.

"Kukukuku... Foiling the final step of the grand designs of my return to earth? So be it! Delightful!"

Echoing as if coming from underground, it was the deep voice of a [Heretic God].

The voice came from the bull-headed giant lying on the ground. Its body was roughly 30m in length.

The muscle-bound gigantic body was wearing a short tunic weaved from palm fibers along with a red cape. A normal person would probably kneel down and swear allegiance on sight, and obediently commit suicide even if it commanded.

The ferocious [Bull] deity embodying powerful dominance.

The Cretan god of harvest that appeared in Greek myths of King Minos in the past. Or perhaps it should be called the Minotaur?

However, even such a solemn and mighty appearance was for naught —

"Young god-slayer... The warrior sparkling with the light of thunder! Takest my blood, flesh and strength as thy sustenance! Swallowest me, steppest over my corpse, becomest even more powerful! Heaven and earth! For the sake of I, who has been slain, open the road to hell as an offering to the king!"

"...Tsk. Even on your death throes you still need to chant insulting verses..."

The dying giant bull-headed god.

Alec was crouching down beside it, making heavy breathing noises.

As the result of an intense battle that exceeded his limits, his brain was now struck with pain akin to being sawn apart; the body was severely injured, especially with pain in the internal organs and that pounding heartbeat. Capillaries all over the body as well as a portion of the arteries and veins had burst, causing internal hemorrhage.

Then he spat blood. Bones were probably broken all over his body.

This pitiful state was the result of being struck by the bull-headed god's angry roar. In truth, he almost died.

"So farewell, god-slayer! May endless curse and conflict accompany thy remaining life!"

In other words, a declaration that disaster will fill the rest of his life.

Leaving behind these last words, the god's body dispersed like smoke.

In that very instant, Alec felt a great weight on his back.

It felt like a new authority had been obtained.

"I came to investigate partially due to pure curiosity; coming here with a relaxed and leisurely mood, this was the result...!"

My life exactly. Even without a curse it was full of disaster.

Alec smacked his lips and turned his head.

Whether friend or foe, he absolutely could not let anyone else approach. For the sake of vanity, he was concerned about his current poise and appearance.

However, there were no others in this vast empty space. Things should be fine after a bit of rest.

...The deepest level of the expansive underground labyrinth.

This circular hollow had a diameter of almost 10km.

Bare ground and massive empty space. In the central area were an altar and a throne for worshiping the bull-headed deity.

Whether the labyrinth or the circular space, neither of them existed on the island of Crete a week ago. This location was born from divine authority with the manifestation of [Heretic Minos].

Dragging his battered body, Alec finally returned to the surface.

(The labyrinth that manifested somewhere on the Lassithi Plateau of Crete could very well be discovered one day, becoming a tourist attraction that reminded people of the Minotaur's legend. However, I couldn't care less at this moment.)

The authority of god speed was activated briefly.

Enveloping himself in a flash of lightning and feeling with his body the passage of ten-odd seconds, this was enough to reach the hotel located at the coastal beach resort area.

Ingesting the healing potion prepared beforehand in his room, he went to bed and slept for six hours. It was already night when he woke up.

By this time most of the external injuries had already recovered.

"Still with this inexplicable body..."

The headache had not improved, however, so he should probably take it easy for now.

Alec endured the nausea and headache as he tidied up his appearance. Then he took a bath, had a shave and fixed up his hairstyle. He changed into a new shirt and pants, even though upper garments were optional in the resort area.

Still tired, but he will not compromise on personal style.

After having some completely unremarkable seafood at the hotel's western restaurant, he found a bar outside with a quiet atmosphere and took a seat at the bar table.

Taking a sip of the alcohol, his mood finally lightened up a bit.

Come on, why does every time have to be a brush with death?

"There you are, Alec. Ditching me at the airport, what a cruel man you are, really..."

A greeting came from behind, carrying extremely sorrowful words spoken by a very gloomy voice.

Without looking back, it was obvious it was Sir Iceman.

Alec waited until his trusted subordinate sat down beside him before starting to grumble.

"I think it's about time for you to overturn the nickname of the ' Unflying Dutchman.' After all, overcoming one's weaknesses is the privilege of mankind."

"Give me a break! Do I really have to overcome that chunk of metal!?"

Alec's follower was Sir Iceman, a Dutchman named Denis, age twenty-five or six.

Nicknamed the Iceman because of his resilient and calm personality, he was a mage who had been knighted in England and obtained the title of "Sir."

Furthermore, he was also called the "Unflying Dutchman" due to a severe phobia of flying.

"I will gladly take on a hundred, no, a thousand men in battle, and even follow you into a fight against gods. However, that lump of garbage metal suspended in the air is the only exception. That thing is... the symbol of human stupidity. Mankind should not challenge the skies..."

With meandering words, he tried to justify his stance.

On the other hand, Sir Iceman was a valiant warrior. His power made him one of the few people who could stand toe to toe with the forces of Italy's greatest hero, Paolo Blandelli.

Humans are never perfect. Alec shook his head.

"Well, it couldn't be helped. There were only thirty minutes left before the last flight for the Dover Strait was going to take off, and yet you were hiding in the washroom reluctant to come out... I believe a majority of people would agree it wasn't my fault."

"Refusing to admit your faults, how cruel. Fine, I'll forget about it. ...Anyway, Alec, you already fought, right?"

"What?"

"Yesterday there was a report of a [Heretic God] manifesting on this island of Crete."

He knew it would happen sooner or later but to be discovered so soon? Alec shrugged his shoulders.

"Can you give me the details of the god fight? Don't deliberately do a lazy job of reporting again just because it was your own battle ."

It was unacceptable no matter what. Besides, the other side also had reasons that could not be disclosed.

Alec simply raised his glass for another sip.

God speed — which the Witenagemot had named the authority of [Black Lightning]. Due to this being Alec's trump card, there were very few comrades who were capable of supporting him.

Very few people could keep up with his speed. Rather than wait for back up to arrive at the front lines it was easier to just fight alone.

"The sense of helplessness, from finding out they did not have the ability to help, is always a painful experience. Thoroughly impressed we may be with our king's sense of worry/concern, I still hope to know if you are safe or not. As much as possible, please keep this in mind."

Alec silently slid the wineglass over to Iceman.

Though he had no intentions of apologizing, buying him a drink was acceptable. Iceman in turn caught the wineglass without saying a word, and poured the amber-colored liquid into his own glass.

"By the way, please allow me to add a few words."

"What is it?"

"Since we came expressly to Crete, why are you having a shot of Bowmore? I love drinking too, and that aroma of the sea is simply marvelous. However, that's still not enough reason to drink a cold climate country's alcohol when we're in the Mediterranean, for goodness' sake."

The trusted subordinate was talking about a type of Scotch whisky produced in Scotland. This strong liqueur was filled with the local flavor of the tides of the Irish Sea.

"What's wrong with faithfulness to one's preferences? No matter what, the most important thing is what one desires."

"Still, this place is really too hot. How about having some local beer to wet our throats?"

Iceman calmly suggested in the face of Alec's response.

On the calendar it was currently the middle of May. However, for the Mediterranean island of Crete, it was already very hot, enough to wear short sleeves.

Alec licked his lips, intending to retort.

In truth, I cared little for vacation sense or awareness of seasons. However, I hate downing beer in massive gulps like some kind of glutton. It is truly imperative to maintain one's style and aesthetics.

Alec was just about to speak but he stopped —

A young Caucasian beauty was approaching.

She was rather young in age, about twelve or thirteen or so. Clearly not an age that should be coming and going in a bar like this.

However, none of the staff or customers in the bar reprimanded her. Everyone ignored her as if she did not exist at all.

"It must be a [Concealment] spell. She hid her appearance from everyone apart from us."

"Probably. This is a spell that certain fairies and witches are talented in."

As Alec and Sir Iceman exchanged glances, the girl walked over to them.

"Salutations for the first time, [King] known as Prince. Allow me to greet Your Highness."

The girl in the white summer dress was stunningly beautiful. The very image of a classic doll made by a master craftsman.

Alec felt an unusual sense of intangibility from the young girl.

Definitely not an ordinary person no matter how you look at it. Very likely no ordinary mage.

Though only based on instinct, it should not be far from the truth.

"If you have something to say, be quick with it. I am enjoying a private moment and have no interest in a suspicious fellow like you."

Alec was a handsome man with a tall and slightly slender build. Though he was not actually a noble, his natural poise and dignified airs earned him the nickname of "Prince."

Sir Iceman was also quite outstanding in appearance with solemn facial features like a carved sculpture. He was even taller than Alec and looked more strongly built with his wider shoulders . Even when wearing a ruffled suit there was an air of masculine charm.

Whenever they sat together they were frequently accosted by women. Standing out amongst the crowd was everyday life for them. However, this young girl was clearly different from those women.

— How troublesome. Alec summed up curtly in his mind.

No matter how extraordinary a person, she was decidedly less than a god. Completely uninteresting.

"Then I shall get straight to the point, Prince. Your Highness arrived at this location in order to ascertain whether the god Minos of Crete was [Steel], is that correct?"

Oh? Alec's curiosity was piqued.

Could this passing girl have seen through his intentions from a glance?

"I feel that Your Highness' body contains a presence similar to the Chinese [Steel], the bull-headed iron-bodied war god Chi You[19], or Japan's Susanoo who is also known as the Bull-headed Heavenly King."

Sir Iceman instantly signaled with his eyes, asking if he should handle it. But Alec shook his head

"Wrong but close enough. It was a war god with the [Bull] attribute, probably the evolved form of a god of the land like Minos — I was only investigating when I suddenly encountered it. "

Well, choosing to go traveling on a whim and encountering a battle with a heretic god was an unexpected bonus...

Rather than that, there were more interesting questions to interrogate this girl.

"So, could you answer my question in return? Why are you asking me about the subject of [Steel]? I am more commonly known as a seeker of the Holy Grail. But there should be virtually no one who knows that I am interested in the connections between war gods and the Holy Grail."

The following year after becoming a Campione, Alec had gone searching for the [Magic Holy Grail].

At that time, he had declared war on the English magi centered on the Witenagemot. Furthermore, the gathering of high level magi in England from all over Europe to become either Alec's enemies or allies erupted into a great conflict — the Battle for the Magic Grail.

Anyone involved in the world of magic would have heard of this great incident.

"The only ones who know about the connections between war gods and the Holy Grail are a very small number of Templar Knights and witches. ...With no smell of iron from your body, you are unlikely to be a knight. But you are no ordinary human — someone known as a Divine Ancestor, right?"

Outstanding senses of smell and taste beyond normal humans were several of Alec's little-known talents.

As well as a mind that maintained a delicate balance with calm and insightful instincts.

Through logical thinking and analysis of instinct, the term Divine Ancestor surfaced in memory.

The girl before his eyes should not be an ordinary witch or knight. Assuredly.

"As befits the one known for being particularly wise amongst the god-slayers, the truth really was discerned from my greeting. Very likely it reflects development as a result of Your Highness' growth. I beg forgiveness if I, Guinevere, have given offense."

"A mere greeting?"

"Yes. Knowing Your Highness has slaughtered three gods, I felt that I had to pay my respects no matter what."

Then I shall take my leave — Leaving behind a smile and a greeting, the young girl disappeared.

Taking only an instant, it was as illusionary as mist dispersing. Some sort of transfer spell must have been used.

"That person called herself Guinevere."

"Ahah. I wonder if that name was chosen as a joke or with special meaning behind it, how mysterious."

Once the witch vanished, Sir Iceman muttered as Alec shrugged .

"Hmm... By the way, Alec, I had a thought."

Planning on making some kind of proposal, the trusted subordinate bore a serious expression. However, somehow there was a detestable sense of premonition.

"Regarding the one calling herself Guinevere, why don't we ask the most accomplished witch about her? Particularly outstanding witches are connected to special networks transcending associations and countries. It is very likely that the 'Princess' knows something."

The most accomplished witch! Alec showed displeasure in his expression.

He understood Sir Iceman's reasoning, but he did not want to do as suggested.

"Since you two are so closely bound by destiny, I think it's best to prepare beforehand when something like this happens."

"Stop the nonsense! There is nothing but ill fate between us! There is no other significance!"

Part 2

The Witenagemot's headquarters were situated in Greenwich, London.

A four-story Victorian building constructed with red brick, very similar in likeness to the government offices of Scotland Yard in Westminster.

The office of the Witenagemot's spokesperson was located in the depths of the building's first floor.

In truth, all the past spokespersons had their offices on the top floor of this building. However, the incumbent declared a relocation as soon as she assumed her position, and the office was moved.

It was rumored that she said something like this:

'The highest floor in a building with no elevators? Unacceptable !'

The graceful and gentle young beauty.

The Princess regarded as Europe's most aristocratic lady.

Unexpectedly more outspoken than what her appearance and title might suggest, the current spokesperson was ignoring the words of her subordinate who acted as both secretary and governess.

"What is the [Magic Holy Grail]? It is the greatest treasure sought by the Templar Knights — the successors of the twelfth century Crusaders who attempted to take back the holy land Jerusalem from the Muslims. It is commonly believed that it is an item that was born with the great land, and stores a massive amount of magical power."

The one speaking was Patricia Ericson.

Hair tied up, wearing a thin-framed pair of spectacles, thirty years of age or so.

"Since ancient times, appearances of the Holy Grail in this world have been very rare. Records placing great importance on the ' miracle manifested when the Holy Grail is found by the Sacred Chosen One' have been left behind by many magi and seekers of the Holy Grail."

Miss Ericson's stiff manner of speech lacked feminine gentleness , and simply listening to her was tiring.

However, the Witenagemot's incumbent spokesperson listened silently without a single comment, until she finally smiled calmly and spoke:

"Yes, I know. And it is still unclear what the 'Sacred Chosen One' refers to. ...Hey, Miss Ericson, I don't really need to revise knowledge on the Holy Grail, am I a bad student if I don't want to learn about things I already know?"

Yes, Alice Louise of Navarre was an outstanding honors student .

Nicknamed Princess Alice.

Though the highborn daughter of a Duke's family, she was also a miko with boastworthy spirit powers.

Becoming the spokesperson of the Witenagemot by recommendation at the tender age of sixteen, she was extremely well-learned.

Perhaps it would be apt to say that she was a world-class authority on the subject of the Holy Grail.

"In terms of knowledge, true... But not in terms of putting into actual practice."

Miss Ericson spoke coldly as she pushed up the rim of her glasses.

These actions embodied the quintessential 'strict and upright female private tutor.'

Precisely because of this, she had secretly registered herself as a member at a marriage agency. Humans were truly interesting beings. (As for how Alice came to know of this, she was using spirit powers when she peeked into Miss Ericson's heart by chance.)

"Concerning the miracle of the Holy Grail, Princess, did you know there is another legend passed down the ages? Another important element for initiating the Holy Grail miracle, the 'valiant and foolish child of heaven' of rumor."

Pertinently, Alice responded with "is that so?"

Of course, she was fully aware but feigning ignorance. Furthermore, it needed no mentioning that the "fool" was a veiled reference to the Devil King Campione.

"With all that said, in the end what are you trying to get at, Miss Ericson?"

"To sound the alarm against the multiple contact incidents between 'that man' and you, the most suitable 'Sacred One' recognized by the world."

It turned out to be this after all. Alice sighed.

"The miracle brought upon by the Holy Grail... No matter how conservatively speculated, the effects of its manifestation must be no different from the disasters brought by [Heretic Gods]. Disregarding 'that man' as the disastrous heavenly child, please do not forget you are the spokesperson of the Witenagemot who is responsible for maintaining order in the activities of the magical world. Please be a bit more mindful of your identity."

"But it's very interesting. Oh my, I've got to go."

"Princess!"

The highborn Princess had a weak constitution. Due to this reason, Alice was unable to leave the house casually as she desired .

However, when a 'major incident' involving the Holy Grail and the Black Prince occurs, she just could not help but rush to the front lines to see how the problem would be solved.

It was a bit unfair to Miss Ericson, but let's hope her anger will only be temporary — no, rather, she could control her anger semi-permanently.

Besides, if this spirit power of flying all over the place could be reinforced, perhaps the frail body might also be strengthened at the same time...

Clinging to the belief of opportunism, Alice pondered.

It was again time to meet that poker-faced and unfriendly Prince and sow new seeds of discord. This young man passionately devoted himself to work, vigorously applying himself to the job of threatening the world as the great devil king.

There will definitely be a response —

With this thought, a letter appeared on the office desk.

This was something sent over by the magic of [Mailing]. It was emergency communication sent by a spy trained since childhood.

Trying to suppress the excitement in her heart, she quietly picked up the letter.

'Black Prince Alec slew a god in Crete.'

One short sentence.

However, Alice was crying out with delight in her heart.

It's here! The expected person came at last. Also, this time it is the long time unseen Campione. This was the perfect excuse for a long duration business trip!

"Sorry, Miss Ericson, I express my utmost gratitude to your kind advice. However, I must leave due to some urgent matters. If I were to become sickly and unwell again, please take good care of me then."

She made her request with a noblewoman's smile.

However, she did not wish to hear an objection. This was in reality an order.

"What on earth is this emergency, Princess!?"

"Same old, a world crisis!"

Alice activated the power of spirit body separation.

Separating from her material frame, the astral body flew towards the sky. Rendered an empty shell, the real body slumped over but was caught by Miss Ericson.

Well done. As expected of my private tutor.

The White Miko-Hime offered praise as her spirit body flew out of the Witenagmot's headquarters.

Part 3

Thinking back four years ago —

Letting his body rock freely with the vibrations of the running train, Alec reminisced.

As a side note, he was alone. Whenever he crossed seas, Sir Iceman was always left behind to take a ship.

However, this time he was directly informed beforehand.

The other party also agreed with Alec's suggestion that having two battles against gods within a week should be impossible.

...Come to think of it, the last time he enjoyed a train ride so casually like this must have been how long ago?

After becoming a Campione, every single day of these four years had been exceptionally busy.

Everything began four years ago.

Growing up in a town in the Cornwall countryside, Alec was introduced to magical knowledge from a young age.

However, compared to magic he was more skilled in gambling and tricks.

Of course, he was not outstanding enough to be recruited by powerful magic associations or the Witenagemot.

The one who taught the knowledge of magic to Alec was his father, someone who most people would call an occultist. The occult that he sought until the day he died was the Magic Holy Grail.

His obsession with seeking the occult was the reason why his wife abandoned him. As a result, he had to raise young Alec as a single father.

When Alec was sixteen, his father's dying words revealed to him a secret code.

Thus began his adventures. Through good fortune and sharp instincts, he faced off against the fallen angel Ramiel, obtaining the authority of divine speed in the first battle...

How nostalgic to recall all these memories.

Soon after, he was embroiled in the battle for the Holy Grail. In order to face the difficult battles arising from continued seeking of the Holy Grail, he established [Royal Arsenal].

If none of this had happened, he most likely would not have met that girl of taboo.

The "Princess" four years his junior bearing a delicate sense of hostility towards him.

Alec smacked his lips.

Why would the face of that annoying girl he was about to meet suddenly appear? It must the result of recalling those unpleasant memories.

"Yeah, I already know that popping up anywhere unannounced is your special skill. But I hope you can learn to behave a little. In a situation like this, it would be proper manners to greet first before taking a seat."

"Oh well. When the terrifying Great Devil King starts explaining manners, it must be an omen for a world-shaking cataclysm."

Princess Alice's spirit body spoke nonchalantly.

There were no other passengers in Alec's train car.

This was exactly why the spirit body of England's most accomplished miko as well as one of Europe's rare witches had sneaked into the seat opposite to him.

Did she detect my location as usual through magical information networks?

Speculating thus, Alec frowned.

...What ill fate, the bothers of this woman never end.

"Rumors say that you have successfully slain your third god at Crete. The god dormant on that island... turns out to be the divinity of Minos after all?"

"I have no obligation to answer you. What a boring question."

"There. Your habit of twitching your right eyebrow the instant someone guesses correctly. It is Minos as expected... So what kind of authority is it this time? It must be one suited to you, a power that is extravagant and convoluted at the same time."

A troublesome woman who always talked back with every sentence.

Their first meeting was when she was twelve. But even back then she was not the least cute: a frail and sickly princess who proposed to the Devil King terms of bribery and negotiation at the tender age of twelve.

Recalling the details of their unpleasant first encounter, Alec clicked his tongue.

"...Come to think of it, historically there have been many members of the English royal family originating from fabricated claims of kinship, thus producing incompetent kings."

A sudden change in conversation topic.

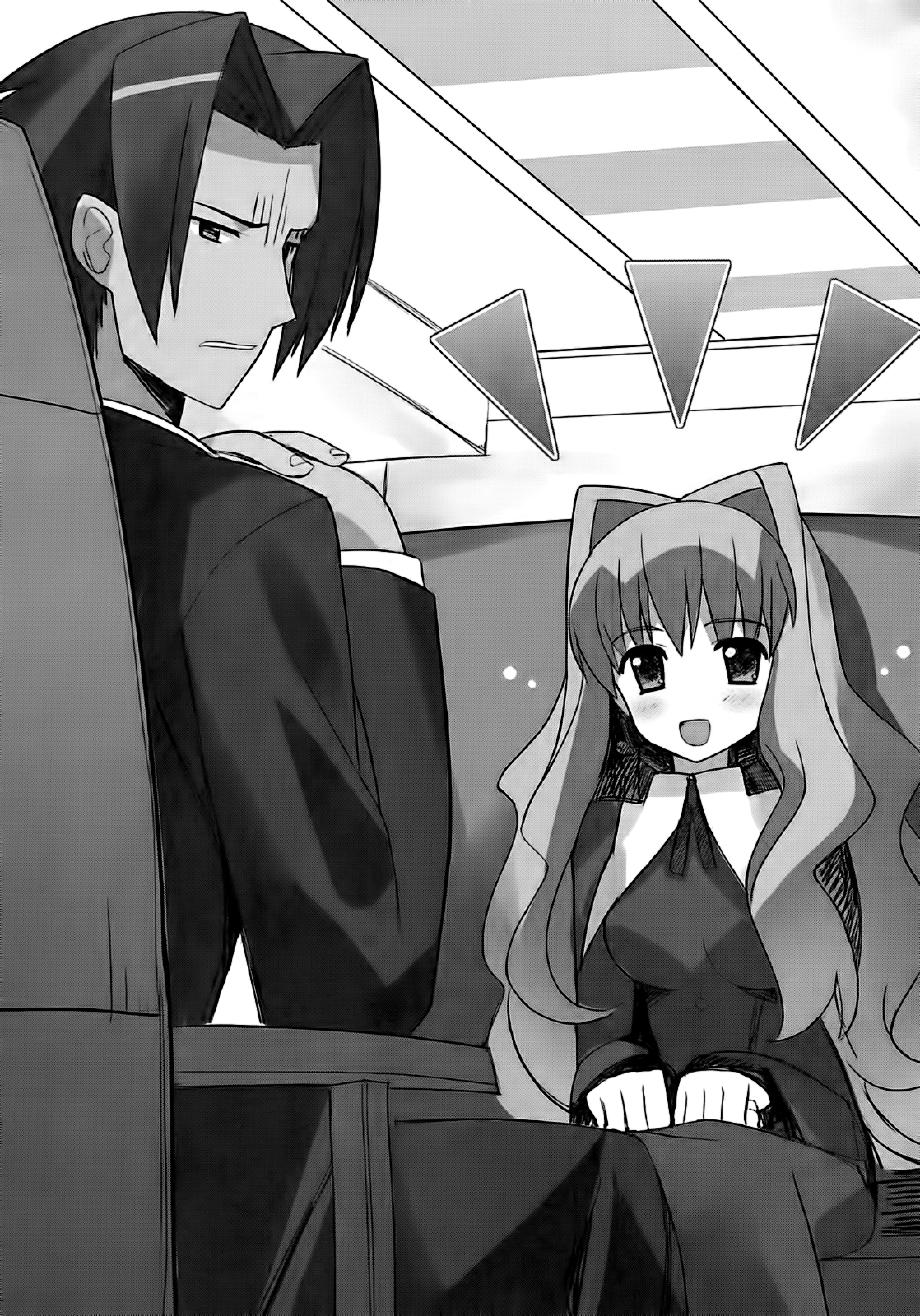
There was a need to make this troublesome encounter into something slightly more constructive.

"That's an affront to England's hero of the Red Dragon...[20] Though I can understand what you are getting at. Disregarding the earlier half of his life, he became rather amazing in the latter half."

The girl with the graceful manners but surprisingly sharp tongue began to launch into a speech.

"The legendary King Arthur of England united Great Britain along with the Scots who were suffering from invasions from the Saxons and the Picts, defending them resolutely. He was the immortal hero who could slaughter a hundred enemies with a single swing from the magic sword Excalibur... Leading the

Knights of the Round Table into battle, he obtained victory after victory."



"However, being unaware of the immoral relationship between his wife and the trusted subordinate, he was responsible for the fatal wedge that drove apart the unity of his men."

"Aware but feigning ignorance... This kind of explanation may work in fiction, but for a legendary monarch of war, it is nowhere sufficient. Likewise for the reason of the country's ruin, the result of suppression's failure."

Alice smiled radiantly as she spoke with a satirical tone.

"Exceptional as a warrior and a commander on the battlefield, but the absolute worst whether in terms of being a politician, king, or husband..."

"I don't know why anyone would wish for such an inept person to revive. I definitely would not."

Having said this, Alec continued.

"However he became an authoritative hero in England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland... even France and other parts of Europe. A man that cannot be understood with common sense."

"Yes, as befits the 'Once and Future King'."

Alice was quoting from the famous work that stood as a symbol of the Arthurian legends.

The tomb inscription recorded in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

HIC IACET ARTHURUS REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS — Here lies Arthur, king once, and king to be.

It implied that the legendary king was not a ruler who would remain in the past.

Awakening in the future world to descend as king once more. Yes, after being fatally injured at the Battle of Camlann, King Arthur sleeps on the fairy island of Avalon to heal his wounds, waiting for his time to reawaken! Hence he is the "Once and Future King."

"...I remember now. About a year ago, was it? The two of us were investigating the legends of King Arthur as part of seeking the Holy Grail. What about it, are you doing that again?"

Hmph. Alec sneered, declining to give an answer. It was still too early to disclose, and he needed to continue deceiving this woman a little while longer.

"Oh my, what are you thinking now? Fine, I will accompany you for a while. Alexandre, you once said before, the truth of King Arthur's legend can only be uncovered by transcending history and literature."

"Ah yes. From a historical perspective, it's not very accurate. As literature, it's a mess. Those are the traits of the legend."

Alec slowly nodded at Alice's query.

"First let's confirm the historical Arthur. This goes without saying, it's just a fictional character. However, there could very well exist an actual person who was the prototype."

"Yes, if such a person really existed, then it must have been in England during the fifth or sixth century."

Regarding specific details in this area, there were many people who knew even more than the Devil King and the White Miko-Hime.

The answer could probably be obtained immediately from them .

They were known in England as Arthurians, a group of King Arthur fanatics.

Starting from the latter half of the sixth century, there was a sustained increase in the number of people named Arthur in Great Britain. As fame grew from outstanding people bearing the same name as the legendary character, popularity increased amongst the commoners and resulted in a rapid rise in children named in their honor.

"However, even if a real person existed as the prototype for King Arthur, he definitely was not a king."

"Britain at that time... was not an independent country. Still considered a province of the Roman Empire even though it was written off as abandoned frontier territory, calling oneself 'King' would not have been tolerated."

For this reason, there were many who believe King Arthur's prototype to be a Roman general.

In particular, figures bearing the name Artorius (which would be Arthur in English) were the strongest candidates. However, there are no historical documents recording English history at the time, hence a candidate could not be narrowed down.

No matter what, Great Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries was in a state of political turmoil.

Furthermore, the original inhabitants of England back then were the people referred to modernly as Celts. Modern Englishmen are the descendants of the Saxon invaders who drove the Celts out to flee to what were now modern Wales and Ireland.

Besides, the ones who wished the most to acquire the prestige of King Arthur were the members of English royalty.

Starting with the House of Plantagenet in the twelfth century, this tendency became more and more pronounced.

Ever since the Norman conquest in the eleventh century, most members of the English royalty belonged to the clans of foreign invaders.

Their justification for ruling England was to declare themselves the descendants of the "Once and Future King," fabricating family trees in the process.

"However, in the end not a single location remains as evidence of the historical King Arthur. It would be more correct to consider the phenomenon of the fabricated legendary king as an achievement of literature."

As the train shook and rattled on its way, Alec continued to ' chat.'

He was merely speaking out loud as he organized the questions in his mind. The incident of the girl he met a few days ago came to mind.

"Yes. In the tenth century's Chronicles of Cambria, King Arthur was just an ordinary general. However, by the time of 1135's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, he appeared as king instead, along with the wizard Merlin as well as becoming the owner of the magic sword Caliburnus."

Alice's pupils shone with a mischievous luster. However, rather than the subject of conversation, her interest lay in interacting with Alec instead.

"This *Historia Regum Britanniae* is exactly the origin of literature on King Arthur. After being translated and published in France, where many additional stories were added by court bards, it was imported back into England and republished..."

"Thus the essential framework of the King Arthur legend was formed."

The bards on the continent were also the ones who renamed the king's sword to Excalibur and added the characters of Queen Guinevere and the Knight of the Lake, Lancelot.

The story of pulling out the sword in the stone to become king also originated there.

"So with that, there are too many artificial changes to King Arthur's story, making it more creative fiction than anything else... Still, this man continued to exist as a hero in legend and was passed along the ages. In reality, he also clearly displays the attributes of the war gods of [Steel]. A completely incomprehensible existence!"

Alec finally cut to the main point.

"The 'Sword in the Stone' is a symbolic theme of the war god of the equestrian Scythian tribe. It was due to obtaining this that the young Arthur became king. Also, the scabbard of Excalibur carried the magical power of immortality."

"Immortality on the battlefield. This is also a characteristic of [Steel]."

God of the military, god of might, god of war, god of battle.

Gods born to fight belonging to the category known as [Steel].

Their existences were metaphors for [Swords], and as living [Swords] never yielded to outsider enemies.

"Well, let's put this topic aside for now. Ever since seeking the Holy Grail last time, I have been considering the problem of the hero's prototype. The one who set me along this path was no other but you."

"Eh, me?"

"Do you still remember? You once said that Lancelot of the Lake is [Steel]."

Lancelot du Lac.

Also recorded as Sir Lancelot or Launcelot, etc.

He was King Arthur's dear friend and premier knight. Honored as the strongest of the Knights of the Round Table, he was a paragon of virtue. However, tainted by the crime of his adulterous relationship with King Arthur's wife, Queen Guinevere, he was unable to obtain the Holy Grail that only manifests before "pure knights."

"The comrades appearing in the earliest Arthurian legends... Sir Kay, Sir Gawain, Sir Bedivere and others, all of them can be confirmed as being modeled on Celtic deities. The river god Kai, the battle god Gwalchmai, and the one-armed war god Bedwyr. However, Lancelot who first appeared in the twelfth century is still unidentified."

Sitting before Alec who recounted fluently, Alice cast a curious glance to the side.

After a long while, she appeared to have realized the key point.

"There are also theories that suggest Lancelot's prototype is the Celtic deity Lugh the long-armed master of all arts.[21] However, the truth of this claim is tenuous at best. Rather, it would be more convincing to say that Lancelot was created deliberately by bards as a lady-killer character to cater to noblewomen and their preference for romance."

As a side note, Alice had been rather adamant in her declaration back then.

Lancelot as a war god of [Steel].

"On the other hand, Lancelot's mother is the Lady of the Lake, who happens to be quite similar to Thetis who dipped her son the hero Achilles in the River Styx in Hades to give him an immortal body. A symbiotic relationship with a water-related goddess is also a characteristic of [Steel]."

As [Steel], gods of living swords had deep roots with the water used for cooling freshly forged swords.

"Conversely, Lancelot has no other characteristics other than this one as [Steel]."

Alec showed a knowing smile as he continued his recollections.

"If this was really the case, then he is simply a war god and there's no need to have a separate category of [Steel]."

"..."

"However, I actually agree with you. Determining Lancelot as [Steel] is based on a certain report, the one that you Witans handed over to the British Library and had been collecting dust ever since. That thing was mixed in together with the other documents I stole. "

It was the report of a researcher who came to Greenwich to study for a semester and then moved on to Asia to undertake field studies.

"Your mind remains sharp as ever, you fellow! Even though you are clearly a devil king!"

Alice began to throw a tantrum.

"Judging from your reaction, Lancelot must be equivalent to what witches — top level witches keep amongst themselves as a secretly communicated divinity?"

"Fine, yes. You really are the worst, Alexandre. You've always been like this! Always setting verbal traps to make me reveal the truth to you! Using methods of deception makes you the worst kind of man completely failing as a gentleman! And not only failing as a gentleman, you are also devoid of chivalry!"

"What's the point of saying all this? Just as you said, I am truly a Great Devil King."

A satisfying victory.

Alec gloated over his successful turn of the tables, but at the same time he wondered if it was a bit petty to have brooded over an opponent who was a girl four years his junior...

"Ah. Really! So that is why you came to this island! Even though there might be some kind of unexpected occurrence, I believe it will surely be overcome!"

"As I've already said before, you are too optimistic. You should always calculate beforehand the worst possible situation."

"Mind your own business!"

Not long after, the train they were riding had stopped.

Carrying his baggage, Alec got off the train with Alice following him with a displeased expression.

"Hey Alexandre. There is still quite the distance from here to the destination. Why don't you just use [Black Lightning] directly? In that case you can get there instantly, right? I think it's better to arrive earlier. I don't want to take the train any more..."

"It is a good opportunity to train the endurance of a willful little lady like you. If you're complaining then don't come along."

Replying with icy coldness, Alec began searching for the bus stop.

It was true that he was able to use the authority of divine speed, but he could never use it casually: because activating that authority had many troublesome aspects...

The quiet little town they had reached was Nuoro, a city located on the Italian island of Sardinia. Like the Greek-governed island of Crete, it too, faced the Mediterranean Sea.

Reaching their destination Oliena would take a bumpy bus ride of several dozens of minutes.

Part 4

The little town of Oliena was situated in the interior countryside of Sardinia.

Although there were no particular tourist attractions, it was a beautifully scenic location.

The scenery included quiet forests and vast farmland, with a sense of delight that could not be found in a bustling metropolis.

Alec knew very well where he had to go.

Walking briskly with no hesitation at all, with Alice's ectoplasm following behind, the two of them soon came before a little house.

The exquisite house and garden revealed the owner's indifference to horticulture, for the yard was full of weeds. On the other hand, the flowerbeds were filled with all sorts of herbs and flowers.

Overall, the entire compound gave off a suspicious atmosphere, as befitted the home of a witch.

As Alec nodded to himself, the Princess behind him spoke:

"Did you make an appointment? What if she's not at home..."

"No problem. It was all arranged beforehand."

"You haven't changed at all. Still paying attention to all the details."

That's because compared to your sloppiness, everyone else is meticulous no matter who.

Alec was just about to chatter away with his retort, but it looked like the lady of the house was coming out the door.

"Finally, visitors to my home, if I am not mistaken. Otherwise, please accept my apologies. My name is Lucretia Zola. You two are — oh my, isn't this an old acquaintance?"

The lazy-looking gaze belonged to an outstanding beauty in her prime, wearing a comfortable fluffy dress. Nevertheless, it was readily apparent that she possessed a sexy body.

Lucretia Zola indeed.

Called the Witch of Sardinia, she was one of the highest ranked witches. She seemed to be gazing with interest at her fellow witch friend.

"It's been quite a while, Madam. Two years since we last met."

"...Ah, time sure flies. You are still as rude as the little child back then. Or perhaps the status of a princess makes you too good for manners? Calling a young beauty like me something like 'Madam'. .."

"Calling someone 'Madam' is etiquette for expressing respect to elders."

Alice and Lucretia chatted away affectionately.

Truly, the connections between top witches since ancient times remain useful even in the present. As Alec nodded at his own deductions, Lucretia turned her gaze to him.

"I don't really think your identity needs confirmation, but a greeting is due as a matter of courtesy. You are Alexandre Gascoigne — the Campione known as the Black Prince, yes?"

"Indeed. It is my honor to meet you, Exalted Witch."

"The pleasure is all mine. However, Prince, let me say something first."

She showed no signs of fear or hostility in the face of a Campione.

Alec felt impressed by her ability to maintain composure. The witch continued to speak calmly.

"It can't be helped for young ones to become arrogant after becoming Campiones. However, to send a letter saying 'arriving tomorrow, hope to meet then' without even signing a name, don't you think it'd feel a bit suspicious to the receiver? It's not good for the heart, you know, and hopefully next time you invite me on a date you can act a bit more like a gentleman."

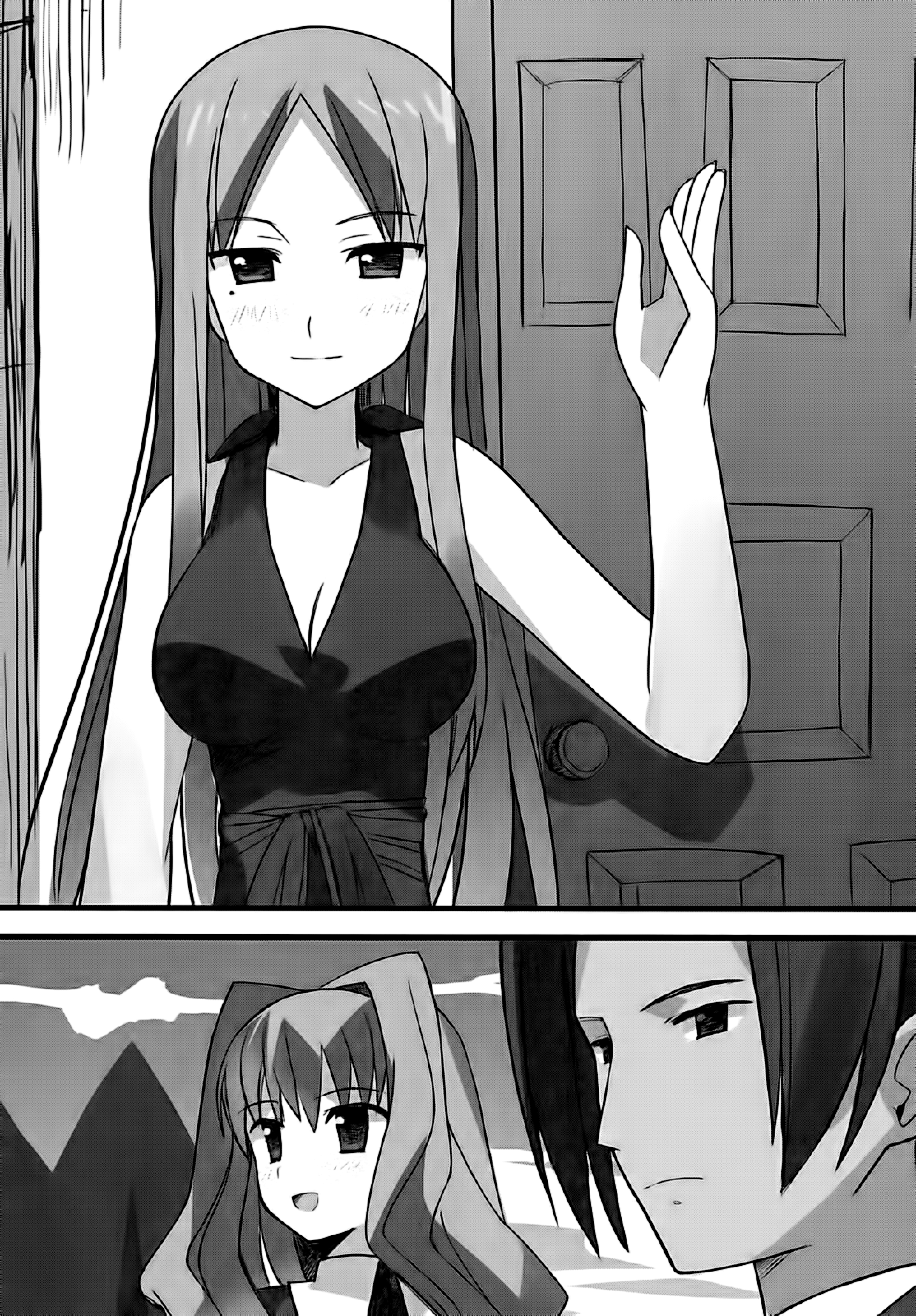
The final mocking sentence — truly made the moniker 'Prince' weep.

"It can't be helped, Madam. It's actually not arrogance since he treats all ladies poorly. Please don't take personal offense."

It was Alice's turn to speak in complaining tones.

"Really... So you didn't make a proper appointment after all. Alexandre, despite your appearance, you are really bad at dealing with women. Hearing your attempts at pleasantries is like listening to an awkward middle school student."

"Mind your own business! Anyway, back to the subject at hand, Lucretia Zola, I have things to discuss with you!"



Alec tried to cover up his embarrassment by raising his voice.

He stared directly at the elderly — but still extremely beautiful witch.

"Since you should be the authority in this area, I wanted to inquire no matter what, regarding the [Steel] war god Lancelot's connections with you witches."

"Oh... If it's about that, I believe you can also choose to ask this Princess over here."

Lucretia Zola spoke cheerfully as she alternated her gaze between Alec and Alice, as if comparing the two.

"Looks like there are complicated factors at work. Well, fine. When I first heard of the Holy Grail-seeking Campione I already expected an inevitable day like this. If you don't mind, please enter my humble abode!"

Alice followed Lucretia into her home, with Alec entering last.

The door to the home of the witch closed automatically, the heavy wooden door shutting with great momentum.

"Before we discuss the hero Lancelot, may I ask something first?"

Lucretia asked when they reached the living room.

Everyone was seated around the table with a serving of herbal tea each.

"No problem. It is only fair to return the courtesy if you can answer our questions."

"...Devil Kings really show a gentleman's magnanimity only at times like this. You're going to continue to become even more powerful, and turn into something like Marquis Voban."

With a displeased expression, Alec ignored Alice's criticism.

It would have been too tactless to say aloud "Don't compare me to that savage who only wears a veneer of intellect." Resolutely, he chose to ignore her instead.

"Then I shall go ahead. Prince, why do you seek the Holy Grail? "

The joking atmosphere was gone in an instant. Lucretia asked once again with a solemn expression.

"Other than the fact that it is a container for incomparable magical power, no other extraordinary value has been identified for this sacred treasure. However, if such an item were to fall into your hands — as a Campione, Prince, surely you can predict the kind of chaos it will ignite... In the past, your obtaining of the counterfeit already stirred up that particular conflict."

In the past four years, Alec had sought the Holy Grail twice.

The first time was the second year after becoming a Campione. The Holy Grail obtained and hidden away by England's King John had manifested. After much fighting, the object of contention was determined to be a fake.

The second time was last year.

It was an adventure whose goal was the tomb of King Arthur and Avalon the land of the fairies discovered by ancient heretical monks. It was commonly believed that the Holy Grail also lay dormant there. In the end, it was determined that what the monks discovered was completely different from what was expected, and thus the search ended.

"As a Campione, if you were to obtain the Grail's incomparably great magical power, a cataclysmic event that tears apart the heavens and the earth may arise. Or perhaps you may become the strongest warrior in history who can destroy [Heretic Gods] with ease. For the many people involved in magic that either fear or welcome such an event, a great commotion will likely result... So, what is the reason why you seek the Grail even at the risk of such turmoil? Pray tell me."

"Nothing much, all I want is to investigate it."

"...Huh?"

Lucretia greatly doubted this simple answer.

Wasn't I clear enough?

"Simply stated, I just want to confirm what sort of thing it is. I want to discern its true nature with my own two eyes. If it is something useful I will keep it with me, otherwise I'd throw it away. I am well aware of the trouble it will cause to my surroundings, but oh well."

Not unaware.

Shrugging at these indifferent words, Alice offered her commentary:

"Madam, Alexandre is a Campione after all. Even though I think he is too serious and petty in weird areas, he turns out to be rather arbitrary with his whims. The main point is, people with this kind of personality indulge themselves in their own little world, bringing trouble to others without a thought."

"If he didn't have such obsessions, he would really look like the type of person who acts seriously."

Lucretia clapped her hands together with a smack.

"It feels strange to hear an unexpectedly honest answer. Yes indeed, though a little different from the norm, it is still expected of one from the lineages of the Campiones."

"Can you shut up with the personality attacks?"

A violent outburst.

Cough cough. Alec made a series of deliberate coughs and continued.

"Back to the subject of our request. Please tell me, what exactly is Lancelot of the Lake?"

"No problem... However, you sure set your sights on a intriguing deity."

A mischievous luster returned to Lucretia's eyes.

Alec remained dead serious and shook his head.

"That can't be all. It is something whose true identity is even more elusive than King Arthur. At least the hero Arthur was probably based on an actual general. On the other hand, Lancelot's true origins cannot be traced at all. There are far too few leads."

Alec glared coldly at the beautiful faces of the two witches.

"However, two witches have judged this unidentified hero to be a war god of [Steel]. One of them is this Princess and the other is you."

"I must apologize. He has already read the report."

"Report...? Ahah, that one."

Lucretia nodded after a bit of thought.

"Even though it was something rushed out madly before the deadline, that thing keeps bringing trouble."

"It can't be helped. That level of research paper can only be read by Witens like the Diogenes Club. Even if they inadvertently wrote down knowledge meant to be transmitted orally, those people should not have leaked..."

The Princess seemed to have turned away, feeling responsible for the leaking of secrets.

Anyway, it was time to use this material for a counterattack. Just as Alec decided that, the Witch of Sardinia began to speak slowly.

"Lancelot du Lac is the guardian deity of high ranking witches — like me who has reached the earthly pinnacle, or the Princess who has reached the heavenly pinnacle."

...Oh? — Alec exclaimed.

"Having said that, the advantages offered are not that significant. Only to the level of bestowing one or two divine decrees when performing long rituals? If one of us witches had the disposition for theophany, then it might be possible to use the violent skill of divine possession."

A symbiotic relationship between the adulterous hero deity and witches, the descendants of ancient miko.

Alec was secretly overcome with excitement. This subject piqued his curiosity and was very interesting indeed. He must dig deeper. However, what if he was unable to pry anything more out of this witch's mouth...

"A womanizing hero who only shows interest towards witches who have attained ultimate status between heaven and earth...? As for beings known as 'Divine Ancestors,' what kind of existence are they?"

The term was finally uttered. It would be bad if the witches continued to beat around the bush. Fully prepared, Alec revealed his trump card.

"Alexandre, are you trying to say that you met a Divine Ancestor somewhere?"

"By chance a few days ago. There was someone who appeared before me, calling herself Guinevere. Know her?"

The Princess' usual disapproving manner vanished.

Hearing her serious reply, Alec secretly cheered in his heart. This sense of victory gave him much satisfaction.

"Even the White Miko-Hime has never encountered a Divine Ancestor. Guinevere in particular, is considered an existence akin to a queen amongst the Divine Ancestors. She is a sacred demigoddess, having transcended human and female boundaries. She does not appear before others very much."

Seeing the nostalgic expression on the elderly witch's face, Alec understood.

There were no signs of trying to hide anything. In that case, he should ask upfront directly.

"Lucretia Zola. What is the nature of your relationship with Guinevere?"

"Fellow researchers in the past, I suppose... Back when that princess had just reincarnated, she made a suggestion to me once.

— If you are interested in [Steel], would you like to search for the 'King who manifests at the end of eras' together?

Guinevere invited me like that, so I accepted."

"King who manifests at the end of eras?"

"Madam, what on earth is this...?"

The two young adults asked simultaneously.

Alec's cellphone began to vibrate.

Tsk. Ruining things at the perfect moment.

Nevertheless, only a rare number of trusted subordinates knew this number of his. The LCD screen revealed the caller to be Sir Iceman. After brief deliberation, Alec apologized and took the call.

'What's wrong with you, man? It seems like you simply love mystery and adventure, including the accompanying danger and peril. This time I can't help feeling that, Alec.'

"What do you mean by that, and where are you now?"

'Not too long ago, I had just arrived at port Cagliari on the island of Sardinia. After taking a ship all the way from Crete, I received a report from the Cornwall headquarters as soon as I arrived.'

"Report? Is it a report expressly addressed to me as the commander-in-chief?"

'Yes. A most urgent report. An hour ago, a [Heretic God] manifested in the coastal waters of Sardinia and has started moving towards the east coast of the island. It looks like it will be landing soon.'

Sir Iceman's tone of voice became even more depressed.

If this continued, a situation of fighting two gods within a week could develop after all.

Part 5

Getting results from the conversation with Lucretia was originally the first priority.

However, news of a [Heretic God] appearing could not be ignored.

First Crete and now Sardinia.

Heretic Gods had been appearing one after another at every place Alec visited as a Campione.

The first could be shrugged off as coincidence, but not when it happened a second time. Alexandre Gascoigne was not an optimist .

No matter what, he had to confirm the details with his own two eyes. Alec activated the authority of [Black Lightning].

Those fellows at the Witenagemot were the ones who named this authority.

Alec did not bother to decide on a particular name himself. This was the authority usurped from Ramiel, the fallen angel of visions and lightning.

God speed — the power to enter a supernatural realm of acceleration.

At the same time, it conferred to the body a kind of agile feline athleticism.

However, so-called "god speed" came with many troublesome aspects. In the beginning, he was unable to touch things that were moving at normal speeds until he grew accustomed to the speed. To others it looked too slow while Alec was too fast.

Moreover, it strained the mind and the body.

After entering the realm of god speed for five minutes or so, his body would start making violent creaking noises. Due to the massive difference in time flow compared to the world of normal speed, processing this disparity caused the brain to give off a terrible ringing.

If he continued for yet another twenty minutes before deactivating the authority, the unpleasant aftereffects would be a thousand times worse than the initial symptoms of time disparity.

There were also times when god speed was overused, making it impossible to return to normal for what felt like three days' worth of time. The whole experience was really similar to the story of Rip Van Winkle.[22]

Even though it was an extraordinarily powerful ability, there were too many troublesome side effects.

However, two years after he usurped the authority of god speed , Alec finally discovered a new way to make use of his power.

Sustained use of god speed caused all sorts of troublesome strain on the human body. In that case, might as well turn the body into one that was suitable to the true nature of lightning speed —

Campiones often made effective use of their authorities by altering the form of their body.

This was called manifesting an [Avatar]. In order to use god speed fully without suffering from the strain, Alec became thunder itself — taking on an avatar of lightning.

Turning into lightning, Alec flew towards the sky.

This avatar dissociated the human body, transforming it into plasma.

Turning into this form completely eliminated the god speed's burden on the mind and body, allowing him to fly without reservation. That is right, not running along the ground on legs as normal, but flying in the sky.

— Well, the avatar of lightning also had its weakness. In fact, it was quite a fatal one...

Nevertheless, it was currently the form most suited to long distance travel.

Using god speed (or perhaps more aptly, lightning speed), Alec flew immediately to Orosei Bay on Sardinia's east coast, moving due east from Lucretia's home inland to reach the shore.

Appearing before his eyes was a beautiful beach. Every May, the tourists flocking to frolic in the summer sea must have made quite a bustling crowd. However, what occupied this place was currently —

Alec stared at the massive creature before him and snorted " hmph."

Walking from the shallows of the sea towards the beach without slowing down at all, it was going to land soon. Body size... roughly 50m or so.

With a shocking gigantic body and bulging muscles all over, it was the form of a strong and well-built male. However, above the neck it had a [Bull]'s head.

A bull-headed human-bodied [Heretic God]. It was the god Minos that Alec had just fought previously.

"...This seems to be quite interesting."

Making a comment, Alec released his body of lightning and returned to human.

"Oooh... This appearance... I recognize it! No mistake, the appearance of an ancient warrior!"

Standing tall, it boomed with a loud voice from far above the beach.

The call of Minos. Hoh, Alec smiled sardonically.

"We gods and ye god-slayers — the two sides commonly exchanging nothing but swords, spears, arrows and blades! However, thou shalt hear my declaration first!"

It's coming, what will be said next?

Let's have a guess, right... Something like: Mine appellation be Minos, God who ruleth over ancient Crete as the great king of the land.

"Mine appellation be Minos, God who ruleth over ancient Crete as the great king of the land."

A correct guess, how boring.

Alec's smile was infused with greater and greater mockery.

"God-slayer! I, king of the land, declare war upon thee! We gods ruling the heavens, the oceans and the great land, and ye devil kings of taboo, are absolutely irreconcilable mortal enemies! Come, as determined by ancient Fate, it is time for us to duel!"

What was with this Minos?

Those were the same words uttered before battle by the bull-headed god that Alec faced a few days ago.

With only minor differences in content, was this an illusion that imitated that god's appearance and behavior? No, as a Campione, Alec's entire body and mind were full of fighting spirit and power, having entered a state of battle. This was the state when facing a Heretic God.

"This shouldn't be an illusion..."

Alec muttered as he sneered.

"However, it doesn't make sense for that god to revive. If that fellow really did resurrect, then more impressive skills should be displayed. What of it?"

Faced with the incomprehensible giant god, Alec was full of curiosity.

The desire to clear up this mystery heightened. This unexpected farce lit up his battle desire and his heart burned with hostility towards the god.

As a result, a change came over Alec's body.

Mastery — he had now mastered the authority usurped from the bull-headed god he defeated not so long ago.

A great sense of satisfaction flowed from within.

If this thing was an incomprehensible existence, then forget about everything else and subdue it first before investigating. That was the fastest and most direct way!

"Nothing is stronger than the great bull dwelling in my heart. Death goes to that which carries false appearances... Very well, I will go all out to reveal your true form."

As the corner of his lips rose to reveal a calm and clear smile, the Black Prince activated his third authority.

"Wind that sings of fascination, night which devours the light, all travelers, helpless in the perilous journey, accompanied by heavy sorrow, abandon all hope!"

Spell words flew out from his mouth.

Alec immediately kicked the heel of his leather shoe hard against the beach.

"Fu, ooooooooooooooooooh!?"

"Hahahahahaha! Last time I was dragged by Minos into a labyrinth, but this time the tables have turned. I invite you into my labyrinth. Enjoy it carefully!"

The god that greatly resembled Minos, but was not Minos, roared in shock.

The gigantic bull-headed god that had just landed on the beach was now sinking down into the ground. The beach it was standing on had suddenly turned into a viscous mass like a bottomless bog.

The bull-headed giant was sunk down to its knees, then its waist, its muscular chest, its thick arms, and finally its majestic head of a bull. All sank into the ground.

Completely submerged. Witnessing the scene unfold, Alec's own body also sank into the viscous ground.

— This was the power later dubbed [The Labyrinth] by Princess Alice.

A subterranean river was reconstructed into the interior of an underground building, creating a massive maze to trap the enemy. However, this was a divine power of creation that applied a threatening pressure on the enemy according to the user's intellectual level.

This was the authority Black Prince Alec usurped from Minos, the god of the land and the labyrinth.

Using this new authority, Alec created a massive labyrinth from the land.

The passage was tiled with square stones and quite spacious. Its height around 10m or so and width around 7-8m, the construction of the passage was rather roomy.

This passage extended in all directions like a spider's web, forming an intricate and complicated maze.

As its creator, Alec had a complete grasp of the labyrinth's structure and layout.

Including his own current location, the enemy's position, as well as everyone caught inside the maze. It was like looking down at the ground from far above in the sky.

"My impression of this labyrinth... is pretty much the same as the one I unintentionally sneaked into recently."

Alec shrugged as he walked underground.

It was true, this place did in fact have the same structure as the labyrinth created by the god Minos on the island of Crete.

Perhaps it was because the battle from a few days ago left behind such a strong impression. Without associating the impressions of that labyrinth, it should be possible to alter the structure to other forms... that was the feeling Alec had.

This should be tested out in the future. Though a firm grasp had been obtained, new authorities often had many uncertainties. Often it required combat experience during first use to truly understand them.

(In the few months after becoming a Campione, Alec gained a true and thorough understanding that "training" to master an authority was completely meaningless. No amount of time spent training could compare to experience. It could very well be true that one day of actual combat yielded better returns in understanding than even a full year of training. Perhaps the presence of tension was the reason.)

"So that [Bull] is now... over there. Hmph, still moving after all."

Alec had a firm grasp of his foe's position. It had fallen into a different place, a dead end 200m northeast from his current position.

However, it suddenly began to move. Completely ignoring the complicated passages of the labyrinth, it was heading straight towards Alec. And extremely rapidly too.

The battle against Minos last time was the same.

Previously, that bull-headed god ascertained Alec's position through smell, and —

"There thou art, god-slayer! With my two horns I shall cut thee to pieces!"

With the sound of dynamite exploding, the walls of the labyrinth were being crushed and blown apart.

Collapsing stone turned into dust, filling the air with flying debris.

From behind this smokescreen charged the bull-headed god. Its body was no longer as gigantic as when it was on the beach. Probably about a tenth in size now with a height of 5m or so. It was a body size chosen to move easily inside the labyrinth.

However, even shrunken in size, the [Bull] — the might of a god of the land was still exceptionally frightening.

"
ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
!!!"

With the sound of roaring, the bull-headed god charged at Alec.

So fast! That speed likely reached 300km/h, and was attained instantly. As befitted a god, this explosive power was beyond common sense.

However, Alec was able to dodge this sudden charge.

"— Hmm!?"

The bull-headed god groaned with surprise. However, it did not slow down and crashed violently into the wall behind Alec.

CRAAAAAAAAAAAASH!!

Crash. The labyrinth's walls were simply pulverized and scattered by the bull-headed god's collision.

A majestic divinity of the great land. Its power, tenacity and penetrative power must be outstanding even amongst gods. These kinds of walls must be like paper to it.

This must be how it crashed through walls repeatedly, opening a straight path to charge forward.

Yes, it was exactly the same as what the god Minos did on the island of Crete.

"Hmph... Couldst thou be —"

The bull-headed god seemed to be muttering in doubt.

Discerning the opponent's weapon from a single glance? Again it was exactly the same as the Minos from that time.

Nodding, Alec moved his body as the bull-headed giant crashed towards him at super high speed once again. With this kind of speed, even a martial arts master would likely find it difficult to evade.

But to Alec, dodging this kind of impact was a piece of cake.

Using the same principle as before, Alec performed evasive maneuvers.

Currently, he was only using half of god speed.

In this state, the world around felt extremely slow to Alec.

It was like the fast forward and slow playback functions on videos.

Even if the bull-headed god used frightening speed it looked like a tortoise's crawl.

Easily seen with clarity.

Slowly approaching. Until impact was imminent in 5cm, 2cm, 10mm, 5mm, 1mm... At that instant, Alec raised god speed to the max.

Dodging with the speed of lightning with a stride towards the side. However, it was only a 10cm sidestep and god speed was reduced to half immediately afterwards.

(From an observer's point of view, it would have looked like he was squashed to the side as a result of being struck.)

Maintaining god speed all the time caused a heavy strain on the mind and the body.

For a human body, precise movements were the most appropriate. This was the wisdom Alec gained after experiencing many battles.

"Truly the footsteps of god speed! The god-slaying warrior akin to thunderous lightning!"

The bull-headed god began to transform. From a bull-headed giant into a humongous bull — !

Like a small hill, the massive body like an elephant gave a sense of overwhelming strength.

"Hmph, as expected. This method — it is enough to use the same trick as against Minos."

Alec sneered and used god speed once again.

Running. With supernatural speed, he began to traverse the complex passages of the labyrinth.

Just as his enemy described, he was the warrior akin to lightning, distancing himself greatly in an instant. However, clearly this was not his full speed.

The maximum was lightning speed, but this was only around fifty percent.

Even so, this was fast enough. However, the gigantic ferocious bull was also catching up with unnatural speed!

So fast! Clocking 300... 400... 500km/h, the ferocious bull was accelerating ever more furiously.

Alec finally went full speed ahead, reaching the maximum in an instant, attaining complete god speed. However, the ferocious bull had also reached god speed!

Following immediately behind!

Furthermore, it was carrying overwhelming momentum.

Alec twisted left and right along the complicated passages of the maze, even jumping down platforms occasionally.

However, the pursuing god in the form of a ferocious bull smashed through the walls of the labyrinth, charging in a straight line. If this continued, it was obvious which side was going to cover more ground in the long run.

Alec running away, or the charging bull?

— The charging bull had a pair of thick sharp horns on its head that rivaled the sharpness of swords and spears. These weapons were fast approaching, intent on accomplishing the goal of piercing holes into Alec's slender body.

"Thunder, descend!"

Alec chanted the brief spell words. Releasing the human body, he turned into thunder — the avatar of lightning.

Abandoning his material body to become a mass of electrified plasma, the Black Prince charged at those horns of the ferocious bull that resembled battering rams of pirate ships. Naturally, it was futile to attempt the piercing of intangible lightning.

Conversely, the lightning offered resistance. The ferocious bull's gigantic body was bathed in electricity, giving off loud scorching noises.

"Oohohohoh!! God-slayer!"

The ferocious bull god groaned briefly. Its violent charge did not stop completely, continuing to target Alec despite his lightning form. This level of electrical attack was clearly not enough to produce a critical hit.

— Right. Alec nodded secretly to himself. The avatar of lightning had not been effective against god Minos either. His electrical attack did not produce enough effect, and the enemy had instantly discerned the weakness of this avatar.

"However, I have seen through it, how to conquer thy impenetrable fortress of lightning. In that case, it shall fall!"

Ahah, as expected. Even the dialogue was identical to that time.

Alec's lips naturally distorted themselves into a mocking smile.

At the same time, the ferocious bull god slowed down, returning to normal from god speed. Its distance from Alec instantly increased, but that was not because it had given up the chase. It was the opposite.

"OOOOOOOLAAAAAANNNNNN!!"

The ferocious bull god suddenly yelled out. It was a terrifying roar that was reminiscent of thunder.

It was also a form of spell words. Sacred words for neutralizing spells and releasing a god-slayer's authority.

Turning into lightning eliminated the burden of god speed, allowed electric strikes, and evaded physical attacks thanks to abandoning the material body.

However, if dispelled, it becomes extremely fragile...

If countered by a god or a Campione's spells, the lightning avatar could easily be dispelled. Perhaps if several magi of Alice or Lucretia Zola's caliber were to gather together for an attempt, even human magi might be able to disrupt it.

Alec's body of plasma returned to human form. If this had happened while he was flying in midair, the result would have shared the same fate as Icarus with his melted wings. Luckily this was not going to happen this time.

In the last battle with god Minos, this point in battle resulted in a desperate crisis.

"Hoh, thou hast seen through my counter, what a man with sharp eyes."

"...Of course, because this is the second battle."

Alec muttered in response to the ferocious bull god's praise.

The true identity of the foe before him was still unclear. So far, its manner of movement, strength and speed were completely identical to the god Minos at Crete. Let's verify in a little while —

"Those who walk past my gravestone, whoever steps upon my shadow, I know each and every one of you!"

Alec quietly chanted the spell words that naturally surfaced in his mind.

The authority he had mastered not too long ago — the power usurped from Minos, will be used to discern this fellow's secrets.

Clearing his mind, he recalled the structure of the labyrinth.

The overlooking view from above surfaced in his mind. Yes, this is my domain. Any destination could be reached without walking, requiring only thought.

In the next instant, Alec's body sunk into the ground as thought.

"Sorry, I am the Master of the Maze. Let me try a little trick. If you want to fight me then you must catch up to me. Fake Minos!"

These words were left behind.

The labyrinth actually had ninety-eight levels. Its structure was extremely vast.

Just now, Alec and the god were located on the seventeenth level counting from the top. Reaching the bottom would mean traversing eighty-one levels. So, how will the unidentified ferocious bull pursue?

It was a massive circular space with a diameter of 10km.

Alec was now standing in the deepest level of the vast labyrinth . Bare ground. Massive space. Located in the center were the altar and throne for worshiping the bull-headed god.

These were all familiar sights from last time. The final battlefield where the defeat of god Minos had occurred.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

Strange crashing noises echoed in the quiet holy sanctum. Alec looked up to the ceiling, which began to show minor cracks. Pieces of stone clattered as they fell. Finally, the cracked portion became a great opening.

The bull-headed human-bodied giant god jumped down from the opening. It landed with a great slam.

Its height had returned to 30m. This powerful monster had used its gigantic fists to smash the labyrinth's floors, one level at a time, eschewing the use of stairs to descend directly.

It must have decided that coming straight down like this was faster than searching for stairs on every level.

"To think you finally caught up, Fake."

Alec grumbled as he looked up at the familiar figure of his foe.

"Even though it's an amazing power, your imitation really kills the mood. If you have the ability to copy another god's powers and appearance, make yourself better-looking for goodness' sake. Ugliness should have limits."

"Warrior of lightning, dost thou intend to insult the divine esteem of I, the mighty king?"

From above came a solemn voice. However, Alec responded sardonically.

"I don't know what game you're playing, but ultimately you are just a well-made counterfeit of a god. Very likely you have recreated the illusion of thirty or forty percent of the original divinity's power."

"...I as an illusion? What nonsense dost thou speak, god-slayer?"

The bull-headed god looked perplexed as it spoke. Apparently, it had no awareness of being a fake.

"Indeed, an illusion. If I had to put a finger on it, there is the fact that you have no soul. You don't have the heart of savagery shared by [Heretic Gods] as heralds of disaster. That is why you are so shamefully weak."

The bull-headed god approached step by step. Alec coldly gazed up at its solemn face, speaking in a calm tone of voice.

"The strength of gods is proportional to the steadfastness of their ego. Compared to the type of abilities or weapons they possess, obstinacy and intense desire are far more important factors in their power. Without this layer of meaning, there is nothing special about you."

Fake Minos' giant body was threatening and full of tension.

It seemed to have reproduced with great fidelity the [Bull]'s strength and charging ability from that divinity. However, it completely lacked the divine power of the [Master of the Maze], one which Alec considered far more troublesome. That explained why it only made use of strength to resist.

Alec looked with despise at the bull-headed god's face high above him.

"At this level, you can't even compare with a heretic god's subordinate deity. What a boring fake. Well, at least it could be said that fake gods have the value of being rare!"

Will it work? Alec asserted with determination. He had enough of training and it was now time to use this power of the fake bull god properly.

'If you have any objections, then just try smashing my body to smithereens!"

"Fine. Smashing thy intricate creation seemeth a pity. But there is no other way to fully display the great power of I — king of the land!"

"URRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAALLAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!"

Minos suddenly — rather, Fake Minos suddenly roared loudly.

Of course, this was in order to use spell words of divine power.

Fake Minos gathered together the spiritual essence of the earth and filled the underground space. This terrifying presence, must have gathered power of the earth not only from the confines of the underground cavern but also the entire coastal area.

Then Fake Minos clenched its fist and swung violently.

Crack! The violent impact struck the floor of the labyrinth's deepest level.

Immediately, the entire underground labyrinth shook intensely despite its vastness.

CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACK!!

From the point of impact on the floor, cracks were gradually radiating out. The surface was littered with patterns reminiscent of spiderwebs and the cracks stretched all the way into the depths of the vast empty space.

The cracks even reached up the walls, covering them with numerous crevices.

Fake Minos roared once more, continuing to strike at the floor.

Rocks from the ceiling of the hollow space shattered noisily and fell down.

As Master of the Maze, Alec already knew that all ninety-eight levels were collapsing.

"Fuhahahahahaha! God-slayer, 'tis apparent that thou canst move like a shadow within this labyrinth! But thy palace is about to collapse! — URRRRRRRAAAAAAAALLLAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!"

Roaring once again, it continued to strike the ground. Obviously, the shaking and destruction of the labyrinth became even more severe.

Of course this could not be limited to physical impact. As a violent god of the great earth, some kind of powerful destructive authority must have been used.

However, Alec was laughing from the bottom of his heart. This was perfect.

During the time it took this thing to reach the deepest level of the labyrinth, Alec had already completed the most time-consuming [Summon]. All that remained was to wait for the signal of revenge!

"Hear me, daughters of the endless night, daughters of the earth and shadow."

These spell words formed the hymn offering sacrifice to the goddesses of vengeance.

Guarding Alec, the infernal goddesses' black wings deflected all the stones and rocks falling from above, preventing every one of them from approaching his body.

"Fighting evil with evil, repaying crime with crime, shedding blood for blood, knocking out a tooth for a tooth, thus vengeance begins. By the blood of the slain mother, tragic death denies all future attempts at filial piety!!"

Standing on the violently shaking ground where crevices continued to appear, Alec did not lose his balance.

The three concealed infernal goddesses manifested from behind , holding the Black Prince in their arms, pulling him up into the air.

On the heads of the three beautiful infernal goddesses, each individual strand of hair was a snake.

Raven-black wings sprouted from their backs.

"Megaera the demon, Tisiphone the avenger, Alecto the relentless, retrieve the curse and execute vengeance!"

Responding to the completed spell words, vicious countenances appeared on the three infernal goddesses.

These were the Erinyes, the three goddesses of vengeance in Greek mythology —

Alec had activated his second authority, previously usurped from their defeat.

[Judging Furies].

Named as such by the Witenagemot, this authority returned to the perpetrator all destruction, attacks, impacts, and curses performed before the three infernal goddesses.

In this case, all destruction wrought by Fake Minos upon the giant maze was reflected back onto it.

"Guh — GAAAAAAAAAALHAAAAAAAGGGGGGAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

The giant bull-headed god's movements suddenly stopped, overcome with pain.

Struck. The majestic bull's head, the muscular chest, the sturdy abs, the broad and solid back. All parts of the body were being struck. Assaulted violently in a frenzy!

Fake Minos' gigantic body shuddered violently with every impact and was blown away.

Struck by a giant invisible fist.

These were all the punches performed by Fake Minos — the attacks that channeled the energy of the great land into destructive power to cause the labyrinth's collapse.

"Then the end draws near..."

Alec commented as he watched the battered Fake Minos.

A Campione's warrior instinct told him that his enemy had met its fate. The incident had drawn to a close.

Alec once again turned himself into the intangible avatar of lightning.

He began to exit the collapsed labyrinth and flew towards the surface of the ground.

Part 6

Alec flew into the sky in the form of lightning.

A massive depression in the ground had formed at Orosei Bay in Sardinia. It was like the appearance of a crater.

This change in the foundation of the land was due to the destruction of the underground labyrinth along with Minos.

Nodding in approval at his own victory, Alec surveyed the surroundings beneath him.

In a situation like this, *she* could not possibly have kept still obediently. Surely she must have come running — there!

Discovering the figure of the girl he sought, Alec flew towards her with lightning speed. Landing on a little hill, he released the avatar.

Recovering a human's body, he immediately ran over to Princess Alice.

As a spirit body, she was also able to fly at high speeds comparable to Alec's.

"You came as expected. Could it be that you couldn't bear killing time in a relaxed manner?"

"Of course. What does it matter anyway? I've long wanted to investigate you properly."

The Princess put on airs and turned her face in response to his question.

She seemed to be harboring a grudge for being left behind just now. Hmph, Alec smiled in satisfaction over his little victory.

"Alexandre, I think you should slightly correct your discourteous tongue and eccentric character. It's really quite rude to ladies!"

Alice spoke in anger as she waved her slender hand, her skin as white as snow.

Accompanying this motion was the appearance of particles of light, glittering as they flew into the sky. They stopped rising after reaching a certain height.

— There eh? A dash of savagery crept into Alec's smile.

The White Miko-Hime Princess Alice had several special spirit powers at her disposal.

Her most representative abilities were spirit body separation and psychic sensing.

Using the latter ability allowed the Princess to read minds approximately. If she extended the probing of her sensing, she could most likely read the minds of everyone in the area. Of course , this was not indiscriminate. For example, it was impossible to read Alec's or a magi of Lucretia Zola's caliber.

Nevertheless, even if she could not read their minds, it still allowed her to sense their positions.

"Glory of all creation, turn into power and be displayed! Seize the key to wisdom of the past as a woman!"

At the position indicated by the Princess' light, Alec applied counter magic. This was special magic for dispelling specific spell domains.

For example, fire-type counter magic can be used to neutralize water-type spells.

Currently, Alec was using counter magic targeted towards witchcraft.

"Hohohoho, as expected of the Prince. You saw through it all."

A beautiful young blonde suddenly appeared in the air.

Wearing a white summer dress, she was smiling as sweet as the most exquisite of confectionery. This was the [Divine Ancestor] who called herself Guinevere last time.

She had been hiding herself using the witchcraft of [Concealment].

"Hmph, to go so far as to summon a fake god. There should be limits to mischief, whether from [Heretic Gods], Campiones or you , who've been leaving suspicious trails everywhere lately. So how many of the recent events are of your doing?"

Alec looked up to the hovering witch as he mocked sarcastically
.

"However, I can't imagine what sort of trick created a fake god. To be able to approach the authority of gods and Campiones, it looks like Divine Ancestors are not a group to be overlooked. I seem to have underestimated you."

"No, even standing at the pinnacle of witches, I, Guinevere cannot do this using my own magic."

Maintaining her smile, the witch in the form of a young girl descended to the ground.

"How was it done? I will tell you in a little while."

"Oh? That's very generous of you."

"No, Prince — thanks to the assistance Your Highness has provided, it is only right to return the courtesy. As for that miko over there — hohoho, what a girl with a bright future. If you wish, I, Guinevere, welcome you to my side with open embrace."

Wearing a pure white dress, Guinevere turned her gaze towards Alice.

"Prince, come with me, Guinevere, and let us set off together in search for this 'King who manifests at the end of eras.' This is the sleeping King of the End, the most mysterious of the gods of [Steel
]. Finding that king is an arduous and perilous journey. Nevertheless, let us set forth together."

"What about Lucretia Zola? Didn't you go searching with her in the past?"

King who manifests at the end of eras.

It was a greatly fascinating title, but Alec maintained his rationality and pointed out his doubt.

"That child is no good. While we were wandering together in search for clues, that child disobeyed the will of Guinevere."

"...Will?"

"Yes, she believed that the last — the strongest [Steel] should not be revived, because it would surely bring about the end of this era of humans."

The last of this era. End. Only dangerous terms were being tossed around.

Without the full picture, it was impossible to imagine.

Alec shrugged, bringing up what he believed to be the crux of the matter.

"This King who manifests at the end of eras... Does it refer to King Arthur? With the inscription 'Once and Future King' on his tomb, will that hero awaken from eternal slumber, to save the world or destroy it?"

"Hohoho, as expected of the Prince, truly clever."

"That is what came to mind once during my search for the Holy Grail in the past few years."

For the first time, Alec revealed the speculation buried in his heart.

"Between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries in medieval Europe, there existed individuals who worked secretly to popularize myths that regarded King Arthur as a god... Their core consisted of you ladies, daughters of the earth mother goddess' miko of the ancient world."

Alec glared sharply at Guinevere and Alice as he spoke.

"It is unknown whether they acted independently or in concert. However, the Knights Templar, its parent organization the Priory of Sion[23], as well as the Order of Cistercians[24] should have interfered greatly in the formation of this myth... How's that, to what extent is my speculation correct?"

"Well well, what should we do?"

Guinevere responded casually with an innocent smile.

"After all, I, Guinevere, was only reborn less than a hundred years ago. It's hard to be sure of things that happened before I was born."

An adorable smile along with a glamorous melodious voice.

Alec went "hmph" with despise. What an impossible fellow to interrogate. But thanks to the ill-fated encounters with that Princess over there, he found it easier to guess what she was thinking.

"My wish is to revive the 'King of the End.' For this goal, I will put forth all my effort, wealth, and yes, even the Magic Holy Grail. "

"What?"

"Prince, the fake god Minos you encountered... Was an illusion of Guinevere's doing, born from the blessing of the Holy Grail. I had chanced upon Your Highness' earlier battle and used it for reference!"

Light shone from behind Guinevere.

At some point in time, a vessel slightly taller than the twelve or thirteen-year-old girl had appeared.

Shaped like a cup or an urn, the vessel was shining brilliantly. Furthermore, it was infused with an astounding amount of magical power.

From the rim of the vessel's opening, how could such an enormous amount of magical power be flowing out continuously?

This magical power surpassed Campiones like Alec as well as human magi by far. Furthermore, the vessel was releasing what was equivalent to the total magical power of several dozens of Campiones.

If just the overflowing magical power was this much, what amazing power must lie within...

"Alexandre, that is the Magic Holy Grail... The Graal of legend."

"I don't need you to tell me that! What else could that astounding object be!?"

Alice shouted out excitedly, having confirmed with spirit vision , while Alec responded gruffly.

The holy relic had suddenly appeared before the two of them. However, it vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. As the bright light disappeared, only the young Divine Ancestor remained.

"Hohohoho. Prince — Alec-sama, if Your Highness will assist me, Guinevere, then the sacred treasure just now can be yours."

What? Alec stared in astonishment.

"As mentioned already, I, Guinevere, am not a woman who hoards treasure like a miser. Even if it is the famous Holy Grail, I will gladly offer it with both hands for the sake of finding the King of the End. — We distant descendants of the miko! You too, must do the same as Alec-sama, you must accept the wish of the queen of witches no matter what!"

The Holy Grail had vanished, as commanded by the Divine Ancestor —

With that, so did the sense of excitement. Princess Alice sighed as a result.

"It is puzzling how I should properly address my senior who looks younger than me... Madam, do you have any idea of Alexandre's personality?"

The Princess answered coldly with a sigh.

As his rival bound by ill fate, she understood him very well.

"This eccentric mister here loves to play devil's advocate and act in opposition. He will never agree no matter how serious you are if you look at him with eyes of superiority that says 'you can have the gift you desire but in return you must obey.' Instead, it's going to cause him to resist without hesitation. At times like this, he most likely would say —"

"'If I already know who possesses it, why would I need to listen to your demands?'"

Alec responded before Alice could quote him.

"You think I will kneel down and beg? What a joke. I never hesitate for even a moment towards treasure I desire. Because all that remains is to take it from the hands of the original owner!"

Alec mocked with instigating tones. Alice commented from the side, saying "Oh well, that's the way it is."

If the current Grail possessor was a powerless or innocent commoner, Alec might have hesitated and backed off due to various reasons, but that was only a special case.

Hmph, that kind of situation was the only exception, hurry up and forget about it!

Alec cursed quietly to himself as he drew near the Divine Ancestor.

"I never expected the owner of the secret treasure to appear so nonchalantly... I should express my gratitude first. Thanks to you, I can finally fulfill my long time wish!"

He activated god speed at fifty percent.

Sparks flowed noisily all over his body. Now he could accelerate at will.

"So there is no more room for negotiations? What a shame. With outstanding wisdom and rationality that trumps wild instinct, listen well, you rare terrifying god-slayer. I, Guinevere, have been waiting... Or perhaps I need to seek out new situations."

Sigh. Guinevere sighed once.

"As a Campione, illegitimate child of the courageous fool, you are truly like an indomitable poisonous dragon. Looks like there are no exceptions."

"I don't know about the other fellows, but bowing down is impossible for me!"

So, it was now imperative to capture this annoying Divine Ancestor before considering anything else.

Clearly just a young girl in appearance, there was no cause for apprehension. Just tie her up using the authorities on hand, take the Holy Grail and extract any other useful information. Well, nothing particularly violent or savage was planned in the first place anyway...

Just as Alec pondered like that.

"Hear my summons and come forth, Sir Knight. Please protect Guinevere."

This time, dense mist burst forth from behind her.

It was the kind of thick fog that completely pervaded lake shores on mornings, with visibility less than 10m.

Then Alec saw it.

A knight in white armor came forth from the depths of the dense mist!

A knight riding astride a beautiful white steed. The visor of the helmet was down and obscuring the face.

Wielding a barbed cavalry lance.

A knight on a white horse —? Just as Alec frowned, the knight had already arrived before him somehow.

What was with this speed!?

Alec activated god speed completely.

The surroundings began to slow down while he accelerated alone.

Normally, Alec was the only one who moved freely in this accelerated world. However, the knight mounted on the white horse made thrusts with the lance, performing a series of splendid attacks.

Looking like the frame-by-frame replay of a DVD, the tip of the lance extended towards Alec as if about to pierce him right through.

This was a martial arts secret technique for countering god speed!

Even Paolo Blandelli and Sir Iceman had been unable to execute this knightly secret art with perfection.

It was the ability to use the mind's eye to discern god speed and capture it using the shortest trajectory.

— Dodge it!

Alec jumped far back to avoid the deadly weapon of steel.

During this time, Guinevere's young and tiny body was lifted onto the saddle. However, the knight did not seem intent on pursuing.

Was protecting Guinevere the first priority?

Understanding the knight's intentions, Alec shut down god speed. His heart as a Campione was full of fighting spirit, and his body was filled with battle power. — Without a doubt, this fellow is a god.

"Probably should keep this a secret from Iceman? Hard to believe, I fought gods three times within a single week!"

Just as Alec sighed softly to himself, Guinevere's voice could be heard.

"That was a great help, My Knight. Would you stay on guard by Guinevere's side from now on, please?"

The young girl leaned against the chest of the white armor, pleading as if being spoiled.

Watching this scene unfold, Princess Alice spoke alarming words.

"That's... Lancelot of the Lake — Lancelot du Lac!"

Softly whispering the god's name. It was a divine oracle from spirit vision.

Trembling, Alec turned to face Guinevere who was smiling adorably.

"I apologize if you took offense today, Black Prince. It is most regrettable that Your Highness will not become my ally. On the other hand, we have a long road ahead of us as enemies!"

"That is your wish? Or is it something you know through spirit vision?"

"Who knows? I've never mulled over it. However, I, Guinevere, am the most legitimate Divine Ancestor. My premonitions are quite accurate. — So, until next time!"

The white knight Lancelot and Guinevere rode the white steed, flying into the sky.

It was like galloping on open plains of grassland.

As the hooves of the horse kicked at the air, the white steed galloped majestically across the sky.

Lancelot du Lac did not utter a single word the entire time.

As Alec watched their figure recede into the distance, he wondered if he should chase them in the form of lightning. In the end, he abandoned the notion because his life would be in peril if the avatar of thunder was dispelled in midair.

"The reason why I assisted Guinevere? Very simple, I was expecting something to happen on that particular day, when the ' King who manifests at the end of eras' appears."

After that, Alec and Alice had returned to Lucretia Zola's home.

The Witch of Sardinia replied simply to the sudden question of her junior, Princess Alice.

"...Really, will there be an actual end of the world?"

"Yes. There is surprisingly little evidence that can disprove such a prediction. I definitely don't consider it a fool's delusion."

Lucretia nodded at Alice's comment.

I see, indeed it is so. Alec was beginning to understand.

If a god of fire arrived, the surrounding territory will be engulfed by flames. If a god of darkness descended, the area will be enveloped by eternal night. The manifestation of [Heretic Gods] always followed this kind of principle.

Hypothetically, if this god that appears at the end of eras surfaced —

It could very well be the beginning of an apocalypse. Even though incredibly ridiculous, it was a persuasive notion.

"After finding out something like that, I gave up my long time search. At the end of the day, it is impossible to maintain indifference towards the destruction of the world. I am not slow or insensitive, after all... Unlike you Campiones."

"— What's that supposed to mean!?"

Lucretia smiled knowingly in response to Alec's anger while Alice shrugged.

However, after saying the joking first sentence, Lucretia continued with the following:

"In truth, there is still a point of doubt. Is the 'King who manifests at the end of eras' really King Arthur? As my research dug deeper, I began to notice that it should be a much more ancient existence that transcends oriental and occidental divisions. "

The woman who was once fellow researchers with the Divine Ancestor sighed at this point.

"I suppose I count as an Arthurian novice. The thought of finding out that the long sought king in my heart was someone else... This was the biggest reason why I stopped the search."

"However, that Divine Ancestor believes in it firmly, right?"

"Yes. She calls herself the same name... as the queen consort who betrayed King Arthur and had an adulterous relationship with Sir Lancelot. Well, the King of the End's identity is still uncertain at this point. If that fellow turns out not to be Arthur, I wonder what that Guinevere would do?!"

Black Prince Alec, Princess Alice, and Divine Ancestor Guinevere.

The scene of their first gathering basically happened like that.

At the very least, neither Alec nor Alice would have expected the fates of the three to remain bound together even after eight years had passed.

Chapter 5 - World is not enough - The Daily Life of Kusanagi Godou

Part 1

Kusanagi Godou was a guy who did not have any unspeakable secrets in his private life.

No lovers that had to be hidden from friends, nor any fetishes that could not be made publicly known. There were also no secrets regarding his birth.

That is why when Mariya Hikari had asked him, he had immediately answered.

"Umm, Onii-sama. You've mentioned before that you occasionally work part-time, what kind of job is it?"

"I do a few of them, but all of them are normal — "

It was a comfortable autumn Saturday morning.

Kusanagi Godou, before heading for his part-time job at noon, had paid a visit to Nanao Shrine.

By chance, his workplace was Toranomon. He had some time to kill before reporting to work, and anyway, he would be able to meet the Mariya sisters if he went to the shrine grounds.

"Physical work, customer service, behind-the-scenes support for example, just some simple work."

Godou recalled the past jobs that he had done.

Among those, were also jobs that were a little specialized. But in truth, after trying them out, he found that they were also rather normal. Of course, this was all in the context of part-time jobs.

It would be really troublesome if he had to explain and elaborate further upon those points.

"Your workplace is around here today, right? What kind is it exactly?"

The one who asked him was Yuri.

Her gesture of gently leaning her head to the side, really resembled that of an elegant ojou-sama.

"An acquaintance of my grandfather and my deceased grandmother owns an old bookstore around these parts. Normally they use light truck for logistics purposes, but they are not able to do so due to a hip injury. Because of that, I've been asked to help out."

In actual fact, though it may be called a 'job', the wage was minimal.

Rather, because it was his grandparent's acquaintance, Godou had not cared much about the monetary rewards, and promised to lend his aid.

Even so, it was better than nothing.

Like this, he could broaden his connections, who could possibly then introduce more part-time jobs to him or help him out when he is in a pinch.

For example, during the summer this year, the multiple jobs that he had worked at to save up for his trip to Sardinia had been from these connections he had made.

Even on the magic side, as a Campione, Godou had been helped many times by Erica, Yuri, Liliana and Ena, they were reliable friends and connections.

Once again, Godou felt that these connections were extremely important to him.

"Actually, I've never had a part-time job before."

Yuri said, somewhat shyly.

"But, don't you work here at the shrine?"

"That is merely my duty as a hime-miko.... it's just that, I'm a little envious."

The beautiful hime-miko confessed.

Befitting of a Yamato Nadeshiko like sheltered young lady, perhaps this was one of her modest wishes.

Understanding her point of view, Godou could not help but smile, and Yuri returned his smile with her own quietly. Like this, the two of them exchanged smiles.

"Ah. Then this time, why don't you tag along and work along with Onii-sama, Onee-chan?"

The one who had abruptly suggested that, was none other than Hikari.

"On your first part-time job, you get to spend more time together with Onii-sama, isn't that a good thing? At a family restaurant or any other eatery, for example, wouldn't that be nice? And then, I'll drop by, and keep Onii-sama company!"

"Hikari! Don't just say whatever you like."

The elder sister rebuked the young sister. However, she looked at Godou with an air of nervousness.

"Ah — ... I see. A part-time job, together with Mariya, huh..."

"S-sorry about that, Godou-san. Hikari had said something irresponsible. — B-but."

Yuri faltered, looking embarrassed, and her expression was very cute.

"If, it is possible, that there was such an opportunity, of course I would not be opposed to experiencing something new... W-what do you think?"

Working part-time with this ojou-sama.

It wouldn't be too — No, this might become a very enjoyable event.

Just as Godou wanted to say [Then this time's a good opportunity], he noticed something.

"Come to think of it, the work I'm doing, it's not suited for a girl at all."

"Aah, is it a job that only men can do?"

"No, although the job is not strictly men-only, it's just that the job is ill-suited for a girl to do."

While answering Hikari, Godou scratched his head.

Although the tasks of this job were normal, it would be awkward to ask Yuri to join him. As he thought, he had to think this through.

"The [normal] that you've mentioned, cannot even be fundamentally believed."

It was past ten o'clock in the evening.

Finishing his work, Godou had returned to his home, located in the shopping street of the third district of Nezu.

He had run into the daughter of the sushi bar's owner, his childhood friend Tokunaga Asuka, on his way back who had told him this.

".... That was out of the blue. To have described me as someone without any common sense."

Godou responded dishearteningly.

Being told something like that, as the first thing upon meeting. Expectedly, he was annoyed.

"You know, if you are asked [What have you been doing up till now?], you should say [a part-time job at an old bookstore]. And if I asked [what kind of job? Hmm. How much do they pay?], to which you should reply [moving a large amount of old books in half a day, for 3000 yen]. For [Isn't that too little!?], it should be [That's not the case at all. Isn't that normal?]."

Outspokenly, Asuka energetically continued.

Though her features were a little fierce, she was quite the pretty young girl. Her long-hair had twin-pigtails sprouting out from both sides. This was a hairstyle that she had had for the longest time.

While his childhood friend was taking a breather, Godou took the chance to interject.

"I, didn't particularly say anything strange, did I?"

"It was strange."

He was instantly struck down.

Part 2

The next day after that kind of incident had happened, a Sunday.

The usual gatherings of the Kusanagi household were usually comprised of Godou, his sister Shizuka + their grandfather, just the three of them. The mother was very busy with her work and private affairs and hence was often absent, whereas the father, after the divorce, had separated from the household.

However, the lunch that day was a tad more crowded than usual.

The rarely present parents — were not here, but rather it was a sudden addition of three people.

"Uwa —, this ham is great — !"

Gobbling down the thick ham steak, Kouzuki Sakura complimented.

Because the ham that was used was of high quality, not much skill was needed to bring out the outstanding taste in it.

"This is something Mayo had brought back. That child doesn't eat at home very often, isn't that such a waste? Today, it's good that I could let Sakura-chan and you all have a taste of it."

The person who had said that in a gentle tone, and who also prepared the ham, was Kusanagi Ichirou.

He was not someone who would obligingly interfere in the affairs of others. However, he would casually lend his aid to others , this was his forte.

These traits were displayed through his expressions and tone.

"By the way, Sakura-chan. Coming here today, did you have anything you needed from our Godou?"

"Nope. I was coincidentally free, so I dropped by. Recently, my friend Fuyuhime-chan had also said that she wasn't busy with anything, and if I'm feeling lonely, I can always pay Godoh-kun, Shizuka-chan and Grandpa a visit, and I like you guys, too."

"Is that so? That's good to hear. Ah, if you'd like, we also have some pretty good cheese."

"Eh, really!? Ufufu, somehow it seems like a dinner party, the menu Father has when having wine!"

Grandfather and Sakura were chatting together harmoniously.

Since the start of September, his cousin Sakura had been visiting the Kusanagi household frequently.

The siblings Godou and Shizuka need not be mentioned, but even the grandfather had been nonchalantly watching over this relative's young girl, and helping her out.

".... Just a little bit more, if it were someone with an ordinary way of life, huh."

Godou murmured to himself, softly.

However, someone heard him. Shizuka, who was seated directly next to him, did.

".... Though I fully agree, the shelves in Onii-chan's heart are easily capable of storing staggering amounts. Directly throwing various things out, or drawing them in."

".... What are you trying to say? Don't describe your big brother as some strange guy."

"..... Hmph. Onii-chan is plenty strange, as a perso — n."

The siblings whispered to each other.

Though the little sister liked to nag, and the older brother did not understand his sister, the two of them got along very well.

On an unrelated note, what Sakura had said earlier, the comment [seems like a dinner party], was absolutely correct.

Today's lunch, with the smoked ham and sausages, and the cheese imported from overseas, were all [tributes] to the mother

Kusanagi Mayo, which she had brought back home. Together, with wine and brandy of famous brands....

These had all been gifts from men, a true display of her title as [Femme Fatale].

Furthermore, the father Genzou had sent picture postcards addressed to the siblings.

Though it did not state what he had been up to, it had been sent from the southern hemisphere, from Cape Town. Upon it was written [Wherever I go, I wander, lost. But I will always be here, friends]. No one had understood what he meant by that.

"Father, what kind of person is he exactly... ?"

Reading the postcard that was left on the table, Liliana murmured to herself.

"I have a feeling that there is some kind of message behind it.... but to the inexperienced me, I am unable to decipher even a single bit of it as of now."

"It's fine. Because even we don't understand it."

"Anyway he's someone who only thinks about acting cool. You don't have to care about it."

The siblings instantly responded, to which Liliana responded with a, "Huh?".

Her silver hair tied in a ponytail, the fairy-like East European bishoujo.

Structurally altered it may have been, but with the pure Japanese style of the Kusanagi house, she could not have been said to look in place with it. However, recently, because of her incessant coming in and out of the house, the feeling of being out of place has all but disappeared.

"But, Onii-chan has levelled up greatly, too."

In the Kusanagi house's living room. Everyone was encircled around the dining table. Godou was sandwiched between his sister on the right, and Liliana on his left —

While looking cynically at Godou's position, Shizuka murmured.

"Openly bringing back one of the girlfriends to have lunch with the other members of the family. Did Grandpa even do something of this level in the past?"

"You idiot. Since when did you get all these weird misunderstandings?"

"Kusanagi Godou. I cannot agree with your verbal abuse to your blood-related kin. Though that may be the case, it is the truth that Shizuka-san has some improper impressions of the situation."

Against Shizuka's cynicism, Godou and Liliana did a combination retaliation.

In the first place, their grandfather had not brought back many females with whom he shared an intimate relationship to the house, because of his guilty conscience. Please do not compare me with him.

".... If you are planning on explaining yourself, I'll listen."

"Explain? I'm not going to do that. Liliana and I, as previously said, we just get along really well, it'll be good if you think of us as good pals. Because it's that kind of relationship, coming to the house and meeting with the family is normal, isn't it?"

"Yes, like the two inseparable wings of a bird, we will not part ways from each other."

A splendid coordination. The breaths were closely synchronized with each other's.

Tightly following the direction of his gaze, to inform him of immediate problems, and offering her advice. Of course, also following up with appropriate actions, bringing a decisive force to the frontlines.

To the team commander, to the King, Liliana might be the perfect aide.

Recently, that was what Godou had thought.

"Because it is completely natural for us to be together, I do not even have the slightest bit of guilty conscience about it. Our thoughts are pure. On the contrary, for thinking that we have an immoral relationship, isn't Shizuka-san the one with improper cognizance? Do understand this.... Ah, that reminds me."

Liliana suddenly whispered to Godou.

"This coming Monday, let us use the ingredients that I have been given to prepare lunch. I'll handle Mariya Yuri, and as for Erica — I'll have Karen inform Arianna who prepares her meals. Once in a while, please have a taste of my very own personal handmade dishes."

Liliana's cheeks were slightly reddened, softly speaking as though she were telling a secret.

That innocence and gallantry combined, looked really cute.

Regarding the ingredients, that referred to their grandfather at roughly an hour ago, he had told the frequently visiting Liliana, ' These are some souvenirs', and had given her some of the tributes meant for the mother.

The silver-haired knight had changed from before; she no longer tried to obtain leadership over the kitchen of the Kusanagi household.

Already, she had become more gentle, a girl who made others feel good with her presence — she would surely become a good wife and a good mother, Godou thought so vaguely.

"Hmm. I got it, I'll be looking forward to it."

"Yes, please do."

"Ugh, ku — h. Furthermore, before the family, to the extent of openly discussing the management of his circle of girlfriends!"

"Fufufufu. Godoh-kun sure gets along well with everyone, it seems so fun!"

While Shizuka was at a loss for words, Sakura smiled cheerfully .

In addition, about one month back, Godou had explained [Liliana had returned to Milan because of some circumstances with her family!] to his cousin.

However, their abrupt meeting once again caused Godou and Liliana to be flustered, but Sakura had regarded it absent-mindedly.

"I, due to certain changes in various circumstances, have once again returned to Japan!"

"Ah, I see —. Again, I'll be in your care — "

In response to their sloppy ad-libbing, the overwhelmingly beautiful hearted cousin had accepted it with a smile.

It seems Liliana too, had understood how to handle Sakura. Even if she continued to pester them with a [I want you to teach me magic ~], they would be able to brush it off skillfully.

".... Although it's always like this, this household sure is lively, isn't it...."

The childhood friend Tokunaga Asuka murmured to herself softly.

Yes, there were three guests today. And the third guest was Asuka.

"Though it's not that there are any noisy people in particular, but everytime this house leaves me feeling at ease...... Really, I can't decide whether I'm for or against this."

The sushi bar that the Tokunaga house managed was named [Toku Sushi].

The lady boss (Asuka's mother) had sent their daughter here to deliver some things.

It would not be good if they were only to accept the superbly self-prepared, seasoned quality lean meat tuna from the sushi bar owners.

Hence they invited Asuka to join them in the living room, and gave her some souvenirs as well.

"Well —, as I thought I'm kind of an ordinary person..... although one-on-one I can deal with Godou and Grandpa pretty well, but the entire Kusanagi family, if you get along that well with each other, the situation looks really terrible. Somehow, Shizuka-chan too, is letting her inner willfulness out."

Quietly observing the members inside the living room, Asuka said earnestly.

Even though she was always so aggressive, this girl could only be stupefied before the entire spectacle of the Kusanagi family. Earlier when they had asked her the reason, she instantly replied [I'm tired].

"Wh!? Don't describe me as if I'm the same as the other Kusanagi family members!"

"H—mm. How should I say this —, it looks like Aunt Mayo's blood runs rather deep, eh — "

While countering Shizuka's comment, Asuka seemingly brilliantly looked at Liliana, and after that, her gaze turned towards the Kusanagi siblings' cousin, Sakura.

"Could it be possible, that perhaps the ones who will remain by Godou's side in the end would be these...."

In a whisper, a mysterious assessment escaped her lips.

The person in question, Sakura, with a smiling face, spoke out towards Godou.

"Hey —, Godoh-kun. This coming week, do you happen to be free!? We haven't met up with Fuyuhime-chan in a long time, and for sure this time, I want to pass her the letter. I also want to go out together with Godoh-kun. Ah, if it's ok, how about bringing Liliana-san and your other friends from school? If everyone goes together, I think it'll be fun, surely."

Part 3

Even on a Sunday night, Godou was working a part-time job.

The place was somewhere in the vicinity of Ameyoko, in Ueno. Restaurants, bars, pachinko parlors, capsule hotels and saunas were concentrated in this lively area.

A bustling street, full of peculiar dubiousness and energy.

Today's part-time job was 'a little special'. When the sun was setting, Godou had entered an unpleasant-looking multi-tenant building's fifth floor, the bar named [three backs].

It did not particularly have a membership system.

However, it was filled with only regular customers, and it was a shop first-time customers hardly ever came to.

The shopkeeper, who was also the bartender, had said [Although it's a modest business, some way or another I can make a living], with no intention of modifying his quiet business style.

Before the operating hours of this hiding place-like bar, Godou entered the establishment, and changed his clothes.

It was a shop with neither an office nor a backyard. In the interior of the shop before it opened for business, he hurriedly changed into a white shirt and put on a necktie, and then wore his vest. Just like a bartender.

"Well then, I'll start with the cleaning."

"Ok, I'm counting on you. Ah, once you're done, help me out with the stocking preparations."

Upon hearing Godou's voice, the shopkeeper-bartender, Yanagi-san said.

He was in his mid-thirties. A slim, good-looking man.

His skill as a bartender was extraordinary, but his cooking abilities that he had picked up as a hobby were also marvelous.

Kusanagi Godou's employer. That was the profile of Yanagi-san .

"Yes.... Unusual, isn't it. Even though you had an appointment today, you still came?"

Always, while Yanagi-san was still doing the cooking preparations, Godou would finish with the cleaning.

That was how the routine went before opening hours.

"Was that an appointment? Earlier, I received a mail on my cellphone from Daka-san, saying 'Today I want to eat paella. And seafood pizza. I'm counting on you'. And also some requests from other regular patrons, for things that weren't on our menu."

While making a bitter smile, Yanagi-san took out the ingredients from the supermarket bag.

Normally, this kind of shop would not serve food made with all the chef's might. Bars, were places where liquor was enjoyed, to the utmost....

That was his stance on it.

However, Yanagi-san's regular patrons, made many requests for dishes that were not on the menu.

Due to it being a Western style bar, it seems they ended up making a Western style meal menu, with wine and the like. One would expect that if Japanese style and Chinese style meals were requested, they would be rejected.

"And because of that, we're going to be busier than usual. I'm relying on your help."

Yanagi-san would not raise his voice in any way, he was a kind employer.

Actually, he was a friend of his mother. Before the summer vacation, Godou who had been searching for a part-time job had asked his mother, 'Is there anything nice you could recommend? ', and then, with a, 'I have an acquaintance who doesn't mind minors , though their schedule is irregular, as long as they are willing', he was introduced.

Still, even while he was thinking that it would be impossible for a high school student, he went for the interview —

"By the way Yanagi-san, why did you hire someone like me?"

"Basically, I've been managing this shop somehow by myself. A child who wants to seriously become a bartender, I do not plan nor have the allowance of taking one as a full-time apprentice. And thus, I just needed someone who would help out when things looked busy. Furthermore — "

Yanagi-san was probably, not just a kind person.

When he had overwritten the resume that Godou had brought, by changing the age to above eighteen, and said 'You, I'll employ you', during that time Godou had understood this.

"I thought that it'd be a little nice, for a naive and obedient boy to be working at my side... Probably, you've caused me to forget about my fatigue and tiredness more than I thought you would. Fufufu, just stay as your densely unaware self, that's Godou-kun's virtue after all."

Well, occasionally he murmurs some weird things.

Perhaps, like the regular customer Hideko-san who had once said, 'Shop manager, you definitely do swing that way, rightYour behaviour is just too amorous!'.

That might be the case. However, Godou was not too concerned about it.

This part-time job's terms and pay were good, and basically he liked Yanagi-san, and also the shop's regular patrons too. If that was the case, he was plenty satisfied.

There were both pros and cons.

Depending on the case, sometimes a little rule-bending was OK.

While exhibiting those traits unconsciously, Godou went about the part-time job's chores today.

Once again, working here had brought about other business and encounters for him. As he thought, quitting the job would be regrettable, due to the little feelings of guilt.

"Godoh-chan, could I count on you to be our support for grass-lot baseball next time?", "I'm planning on going in to the depths of Mt. Ontake, harvesting herbs. I'll pay you a part-time job's wage so help us out?" , "Next month, there's a wine-tasting event. Let's all go. Shop manager and Godoh-chan, let's go together!", "Hey, I need a lot of manpower for next week's inventory count. You did say you were looking for a part-time job!?", "With the source of Tonegawa river in mind, I have a rigorous programme planned out.... I'm looking for men with confidence in their physical abilities.", "Although I can't give you payment in kind, but the display and sales of new products event next time, come and be a salesperson for me."

Among others. A non-stop exchange at the bar's counter.

While helping Yanagi-san out by polishing the glass, setting up the liquor bottles, washing the tableware, various voices were calling out to him.

Before, Godou had said, 'Please introduce me to any good part-time jobs you know', to the regular patrons.

Afterwards, before he realized it, he was well-known amongst the regular patrons as, [a young man with good physical strength who will not slack off, with excessively high adaptability and was currently in the middle of looking for part-time employment].

Nowadays, more than half of Godou's part-time jobs were introduced to him from here.

Well, although there were other things introduced besides part-time jobs, seemingly interesting offers did turn up from time to time.

Although Kusanagi Godou thought of himself as a tough person, sometimes he just wanted to forget about school and his life as a devil king Campione, and to take a break from that life.

Thus, the work for the day ended.

After the operating hours, the bar was cleaned and tidied up.

The time was approaching twelve midnight. Just a little bit more and the date on the calendar would change to Monday.

Usually after closing shop, he would be treated to a meal. However, they had cooked up a lot, and there were not many ingredients left.

And hence, after bidding goodbye to Yanagi-san who was doing the accounts at the register, Godou excused himself.

I'll go home after eating something, maybe even ramen.

Come to think of it, his baseball mate Rui had said to him, 'If it's ok with you, after your part-time job, there's an interesting festival float event happening, wanna try going? We'll invite Miura-kun and Nakayama-kun too. All of us live around this area anyway', as an invitation.

Anyhow about today, it would be fine if he just said something next week —

While considering that, Godou got onto his mountain bike, and set out for Kasuga street.

Passing through Ueno Okachimachi and heading in the direction of Yunoshima, on the way back to the 3rd district of Nezu, which was parallel to Shinobazu street. The standard regular route. A road he was very familiar with from commuting to work, back and forth.

However.

Today, some guys that he was unacquainted with, were obstructing his path.

There were three of them. All of them, were dressed in a bizarre fashion.

Covered in yellow overalls from top to bottom — was that a track suit?

He had seen this long ago in the past, and he recalled a movie starring a great kungfu star[25]. Also, another action movie[26] included a blond beauty wielding a Japanese sword who was seeking revenge.

Godou could not make out the trio's faces. He was made to think of classical Chinese opera, as their faces were besmeared with queer make-up.

HOOOAAAAaaaaaa..........

An ominous breath, escaped from the trio's throats.

And then, these guys took a strange Kenpou-like stance.

Right before Kusanagi Godou, they were glaring at him. Within their eyes dwelled hostility and bloodthirst. *I see — this is an ambush, and furthermore, an attack under the cover of darkness.*

Understanding the circumstances, Godou stopped his bike.

Part 4

"If you have something to say to me, I'll listen to you just this once."

Godou, still mounted on his mountain bike, called out to the queer trio.

He was outnumbered. Godou did not want to throw away his superiority in mobility... While calmly considering these factors, he found the situation becoming more and more unpleasant.

The feeling of incurring someone's enmity, is... Well, although whether there is or isn't is a delicate issue, even if it's a grudge, threat or grievance, I don't feel like running away from these guys who seem like they have something to say.

As one would expect, a disturbance to that extent had been raised.

Which is why, he had to make a calm appeal firstly.

— However, the trio did not reply.

SHIAAAAaaaaa! FUOOoooooO! Heeeyyaaaa!!

Once again, an ominous breath escaped, followed by a yell. It was like the cry of some strange bird.

No room for negotiation, huh. Dangerous tools were grasped in their hands. Hemp rope, handcuffs, and then, a syringe filled with fluid.

Could it be, that they intended on capturing Kusanagi Godou?

The moment he noticed that, he had already stepped on the pedal of his mountain bike.

In one breath, he accelerated. Throwing himself straight into the trio's midst, at the guy in the middle!

The queer trio faltered before the sudden assault, and scattered left and right in a hurry.

Into whatever space he could, he charged in on his mountain bike. Further acceleration. The trio's barring his path, were easily breached.

It had turned out to be much faster than Godou expected, and he felt it was anti-climatic.

However, he quickly changed his opinion.

Those guys gave chase with immense speed from behind him. The trio were riding granny bikes that were meant for use on the streets, and were pedaling with all their might!

What Godou was riding was a mountain bike.

In terms of weight, it was lighter than road bikes, and it should be overwhelmingly lighter than granny bikes. The gears were also different. Thus the acceleration capability should have been higher .

In spite of that, the trio, on their granny bikes, were closing the gap bit by bit.

The difference of their leg power — this was probably not it. Surely, it was the difference in their spirit.

What was approaching from behind, was not just the trio. They were emitting an aura that seemed to speak, 'No matter what, we'll definitely capture you!'.

While feeling the pressure of being pursued, Godou continued moving, on the banks of Shinobazu Pond.

At that time, one of the trio shouted out.

"FUOOOAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

The cry of the spirit. That was perhaps, a warcry for the purpose of channelling and straining all the power in their physical body.

One of the granny bikes sped up tremendously.

Finally catching up with Godou's mountain bike, right next to him. And then, the queer person jumped off the granny bike.

Yes, aiming straight for the Kusanagi Godou that was next to him!

Just like a flying body press. As though he were a Mexican pro wrestler who was skilled at aerial assassination, a plancha suicida.

A splendid, and furthermore, a self-destructive attack.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAAA!?"

Taking the do-or-die suicide attack, Godou was thrown off his bike.

"Owwwwww....."

While moaning, Godou started to pick himself up.

He had suffered grazes on various parts of his body. Something like this, compared to the wounds that he had been dealt in mortal combat up till now, were literally mere scratches, but....

Next to him, the queer person who had did an aerial assassination technique on him started to get up too.

He had sustained similar levels of injuries. There did not seem to be any serious injuries, like bone fractures.

Moreover, the other two comrades had caught up on their granny bikes. This time, they did not simply obstruct his path. A full surround, cutting off all retreat.

It was the worst possible time, and the situation looked grim. However, Godou tilted his head to the side, puzzled.

No matter how much time passes, he had no confidence that he would be able to use Verethragna's authorities. In other words, because they were normal people, the power would not activate. And with that, the chase.

If the other party had been either Lu Yinghua or Erica and the others, they would be able to catch up with their running ability, and should be able to overtake him.

These guys, just who on earth were they!?

— The moment he thought of that question in his mind, the cavalry arrived at the scene.

"Your Majesty, are you alright!? I'll clean these guys up right away, just hold on!"

"Godou, your knight will be showing her bravery and beauty on the battlefield, take a good look at me!"

The pair that came flying out from the darkness of the night, were people he knew very well.

The long sword wielding hime-miko, Seishuuin Ena.

And the other one was, of course, Erica Blandelli!

.... In the ensuing conflict, well, there was nothing worthy of special mention.

For example, Ena KO-ing mysterious person A with a strike to the jaw, with her palm.

Erica dealing a chop to mysterious person B's face with a brilliant backhand blow, causing the victim to faint in agony.

And as for the last mysterious person, C, Ena had utilized a showy roundhouse kick, and though it was simple, the killing power looked ridiculously high, and drove her foot into the solar plexus mercilessly.

Immediately following, Erica, in the middle of a big, impractical jump kick motion, had used the only move that was effective in actual combat, testimony to her prowess as a street fighter, a jumping knee that smashed into the temple of C. The lengthy and detailed explanation was most likely redundant.

That was how, the three queers had fainted.

Giving them a sidelong glance, Godou, Erica and Ena faced each other.

"Thanks, you bailed me out there.... but, why are you guys here ?"

"How it came about is not something significant, but by chance, there was someone who told me Ena-san had come to Tokyo."

First, Erica had said, nonchalantly. 'By chance', eh.

Godou thought. Surely, several factors of inevitability had been entwined and come together, which is what 'by chance' referred to. For example, relying on someone for the provision of information.

"In the Asakusa district of Tokyo, a dojo of some sort, right."

"Green Dragon-sensei's dojo. Ena and Amakasu-san.... in other words, a person authorized by the History Compilation Committee. In Asakusa, it's Green Dragon-sensei, in Setagaya it's White Tiger-sensei, and in Azabu it's Vermilion Bird-sensei, and in Ouji it's Black Tortoise-sensei, the four of them are there. They, as assistant instructors, have instructed Ena and the others in various ways of martial arts."

".....Someone just like you?"

Those whom Ena had listed, all of them had only strange names .

"Yep, yeah. With regards to martial arts, people who are much more awesome than Ena. Something like the Four Great Heavenly Kings of the imperial capital. Anyway, before I paid your Majesty and Yuri's place a visit I dropped by the dojo, and was asked about various things."

"Various?"

"The assistant instructor, Green Dragon-sensei for example, and the other disciples. They, asked if Ena was finally going to be a wife."

A perfect, flawless beauty, fair and lively, that was Seishuuin Ena.

That kind of girl had said that while blushing, bashfully. It was unusual, a conduct different from her usual self, and was also awfully cute.

"Wi-wife?"

"Yep.... Everyone, looks like they've heard about your Majesty. ' Have you had a baby already', 'Is your bridal training going well?', for example, I was asked some troublesome things...."

"Eeeeeeeeh!?"

Ena reported, slightly casting her gaze downwards. That appearance was rather fresh, and surprising.

She was wearing her usual — an unidentified high school's uniform.

It was not something one should be wearing on Sunday. She was a girl who did not care much about her appearance. However, that kind of girl was innocently expressing her affection for Kusanagi Godou. The happy feeling of having this intimate relationship was conveyed directly.

Of course, he was glad about that, but..... Godou felt dizzy.

How should he respond to her, he was troubled as he could not decide. And besides, words like 'baby' and 'bridal training' had been used, what was that about?

The various burdens that Ena and the others bore were grave enough realities.

However, it was far too early to comment on that —

Beside the faltering Godou, Erica said, with a slightly angry expression.

"Yeah. Them having that kind of exchange at the dojo, I came to know of it by chance. That is why, I thought I had to correct those guys' mistake, and I dropped by the dojo for a little...."

Again, 'by chance', eh. Well, I shall refrain from delving into that.

Rather, what he was concerned with was the situation. The situation seemed almost as if —

"Showily defeating the entire dojo, that was the first time I've seen something like that. That time, Erica-san, was really outstanding."

To Ena's words, Godou nodded his head deeply in assent. Just as he thought, it had been like that.

"From there on, one thing led to another, but well, Ena-san and I started arguing about whose rank as a lover was higher in front of those guys there, and our mutual thoughts were conveyed and addressed to each other, and then we started to compete in the sword and cooking — "

"Cooking? Seishuuin, you can cook?"

The crimson bishoujo and domestic chores. That there would be a point of contact between these two, it was very hard to believe.

Because of that, Godou did not bother to waste his breath, and only asked Ena.

"Ah — ..... Yes. I'm good at broiling the fish I catch with salt. And after that would be strangling chickens or hares, for example, then removing the fur or feathers, draining the blood, and turning them into meat, I think I'm also pretty good at those. Beyond that, I can only whole roast or stew."

As expected, she was like a child of nature, a 'wild' answer.

How would they compete with each other? Pondering whether to ask, Godou worried.

"In the end, a clear winner between the two of us was never decided, but this time, another new dispute had arose between us."

"... Dispute?"

"Yes. Hey, your Majesty, for this coming winter vacation, would you rather visit the hot springs or go skiing!?"

"As for me, I insist that we should be going skiing in Switzerland. My family has always done so in winter. Uncle Paolo-sama will be coming to the Blandelli family's mountain villa too, don't you think that sounds good?"

"Ena thinks that the hot springs would be good — . In the mountains that the Seishuuin main house in Chichibu owns, there's a genuine secret hot spring that no one besides Ena knows. Climbing the snowy mountains is tough, but doesn't it sound pretty fun?"

"And with that, we thought we should ask Godou his opinion on which he feels is better."

"Erica-san then used searching magic, and investigated into your location. And thus, as your Majesty was being assaulted, we joined in the fray to save you."

"Well, Godou, that about sums it up. Anyway, which programme sounds better to you, give us your honest opinion."

"Yes, do tell us frankly. But leaving that aside, *that* is more important now."

About the queer trio that had fainted, Godou caught a fleeting glimpse of what they could do.

Similar to Erica and Ena in their unprecedented pace of doing things, they were their comrades in that regard.

"Ah — , these guys. Things like their background information, for example, will they obediently tell them to me — ?"

"If they won't be obedient, I'll have no choice but to make them so.... But actually, I'm poor at having unrefined negotiations like that."

"Heh, how surprising. Because it's Erica-san, I thought you'd be well-informed in that kind of thing. In the past, poisoning and torture were rather popular in Italy, am I correct?"

"Yes, from the Renaissance Era. Not as far as the time of Cesare Borgia, that would also be an emulation of countries in civil war. However, Erica Blandelli's style is a little different."

"I see. Ena is also bad at that. Although I'm fine with asceticism, torture is a little — "

"As I thought, a fair and square duel is the best, chivalrous way. But, they came to the Campione as assassins. Surely they've safeguarded their minds with protection spells, to prevent their minds from being read by certain techniques when captured, employing those tricks."

"That's right, surely.... No way around it, but for now let's try pouring some water on them?"

"Yeah. Luckily, it seems there's a pond there."

You guys, shouldn't you worry about the torture method first....

The two of them, the vectors of their train of thought went beyond the imagination. Even though their personalities were that different. It was unexpected, and Godou was just about to stop Erica and Ena.

However, he was a little too late.

Bon, bon, bon. The sounds of three heavy objects being thrown into the water.

However, with that step the true identities of the queer trio was revealed. Thrown into the Shinobazu Pond, the make-up on their faces were washed off.

...... Nanami, Sorimachi, Takagi.

They were Godou's classmates, the faces of those going by the nickname 'idiot trio' had appeared.

Part 5

"It all started like this, during homeroom last month..."

One of the idiot trio who had been salvaged from Shinobazu Pond, Nanami recounted.

All of them were trembling, looking cold, going *brr brr*. They had become completely wet, at night in October. Exposed to the night wind, even the core of their body became completely chilled.

"That time, we were waiting for the right moment, intending to suggest a [school swimsuit + nekomimi maid cafe] for the school festival's class project...... ! During March, we refined and refined the idea with all our might!"

Sorimachi cried out, with a burning tone in his voice.

Ah — was it that, Godou recalled. The project which the girls of the class had objected.

A class poll was held, and it was instantly rejected.

"However, we still had another plan. We gave up on the class project, and realized we just had to participate in the school festival as student volunteers . [School swimsuit + nekomimi maid cafe], for its realization, we made efforts to gather comrades. And Kusanagi who had forgotten his previous ties, to think we even asked you!"

This time, it was Takagi who spoke.

However, Godou was puzzled by that claim.

"Did you ask me or something? In the first place, did I have some sort of disagreement with you guys?"

"Ngh! Because of this, Riajuus[27] are.... "

"What a hateful show of composure..."

"Ku-Kusanagi.... leave aside the disagreement for now. Are you saying that you've forgotten about our request!? Because of our heartrending grief, that is why we had requested that of you! ' Please, we want to select Erica-sama, Mariya-san, Liliana-san and then, if possible, the Kusanagi sister as the main cast for our [school swimsuit + nekomimi maid cafe]. Please help us persuade them.'!"

"Now that you mention it, you did request that of me..."

However, with that, it did not seem as though he would say that he invited Kusanagi Godou.

"No, if it's just me by myself, of course I would help when I'm free. Still, Erica and the others are a little... Of course I'd refuse."

Godou said while scratching his head. And then, Ena who seemed as though she was in wonder, asked him.

"Your Majesty, why did you refuse? It'd have been fine if you had just persuaded us, wouldn't it?"

"Hey, Erica. If I had begged you, would you have consented?"

"It's an offer that's not even worth the consideration. It's something you didn't even bother to try asking, right?"

It was curtly refused by Erica, and he nodded his head in assent within his heart.

Well, it's come to that, huh. In response to the exchange between Godou and the others, the idiot trio shed their tears.

"In the meantime, the day of the school festival was rapidly drawing closer.... ! The remaining time was steadily running out.... ! Then, we made one last gamble. We intended to capture Kusanagi, using him as leverage, to urge Erica-sama and the others to be maids for us! Although it was that sort of plan!"

"No way — . Shouldn't you guys have come up with a better plan?"

Godou said seriously. It was to an extent that they had started to give in to despair.

"So Godou, what do you plan on doing with these guys? Even as a joke, it's still an attempted abduction, so I think that it's OK even if we do something proper in retaliation?"

"That's right — . Although it's not an eye for an eye, wouldn't it be fine if we just break them a little?"

Erica and Ena asked.

However, Godou rejected that notion. More or less, he had only suffered a few scratches, it was nothing serious.

Furthermore the idiot trio, occasionally had these strange moments of hostility.

Although he was absolutely certain of these guy's eccentricity, Godou might have done something to provoke their animosity. That was something, that he did not quite understand as of now....

Well, they had issues of their own, but they were rather lovable idiots, he felt. Certainly, to the realization of the [school swimsuit + nekomimi maid cafe], in any case, their passion was the genuine real deal, and Godou could feel that —

Profoundly considering the fact that they had gone that far, Godou was suddenly struck with an idea.

"If you guys really want it, I have a few acquaintances who wouldn't mind if I introduce them to you. In the meantime, shall we try asking that guy?"

He proposed a summarized idea.

"Ku-Kusanagi, w-we misunderstood you....."

"Our bosom friend!"

"You're also our comrade — One who walks on the path to the maid heaven!?"

"No, I still haven't really done anything yet."

To the idiot trio who were blurting things out enthusiastically, Godou quickly replied.

Several days later, in Akihabara.

The multi-tenant building that the Hong Kong Lu family had used as their headquarters. In that was the maid yumcha house [Peerless Statesman].

In the VIP room that ordinary customers would never be able to enter, they were in the interior of said room. The maids would bring in drinks and dim sum at times, but other than that they rarely came.

"That trio, they are energetically continuing with the preparations."

While scowling at his hand in their card game, Lu Yinghua said.

Sayanomiya Kaoru, Amakasu Touma, and also Godou were present.

A personal table for the purpose of enjoyment.

There was also billiard table and dart boards, to name a few, an abundance of game equipment.

"A school festival in Honored Uncle's district? In addition, to get done on time the selection of maids, ordering of uniforms, provisions, ingredients and materials, making an effort at all of the above. My underling will see to its completion, so please do not worry."

"Sorry about that, Yinghua. Making these unreasonable demands of you...."

Godou apologized, while throwing aside his hand.

After that night, he introduced the idiot trio to Lu Yinghua. From the Hong Kong Lu family who dealt with maids as their family business, the specialist friend that he had mentioned.

To have recalled this [nephew] while over there, there had been a reason.

"Well, to say the real motive, though the Maid Palace that Honored Uncle produced himself is good, just as I thought, eh. At present, accompanying my school friend out to play, I don't mind doing a maid cafe at a school festival. By doing so, Honored Uncle's motivation might increase."

"Lu-san, are you proposing that kind of idea to Kusanagi-san?"

"Maid Palace, eh. Lu-san, if it's ok with you, I'll participate too."

While looking at his hand, Amakasu interjected.

Kaoru also smiled, with a 'fufu'. Somewhere along the way, Lu Yinghua's way of addressing had changed. The androgynous hime-miko seemed pretty skilled at closing the distance between people.

"My Honored Uncle being an expert at handling [women], all of the people across the lands know of this. The Maid Palace, infused with the thoughts of such a prodigal hero, would definitely succeed and be profitable, I think. But because nothing can be done to make my Honored Uncle himself get interested, it's indeed troubling."

"No, Yinghua..... Stop complimenting me in those weird ways. People will misunderstand."

"It was a joke. Taking hold of my master's reins, the handling of that transcendent woman — the mastery of that technique, you have my admiration from the bottom of my heart. Furthermore, the unmanageable Erica-neesan, even her.... Fufufu, for sure, Honored Uncle is the gentleman that Yinghua respects."

Sometime ago, after a reunion they had in this building. Lu Yinghua had invited him, to join in the production of such a Maid Palace. Godou had not hesitated, and gave him an immediate refusal.

"Well, I thought it'd be boring if that plan never took flight. Before, I had told my Honored Uncle that 'Should you ever have need of things regarding maids, do give us, the Lu family, a call'. But I never expected for a chance to come this early."

Lu Yinghua recounted, to Amakasu and Kaoru.

True. Because that kind of incident had occurred, Godou had come to them for their assistance for the idiot trio. For the Maid Palace, in any case, he had planned to pay them back for it, someday, somehow.

"But, to have resolved various problems and come to an amicable solution, that's a relief."

Drawing a card from the mountain of cards, Godou murmured.

Then, Amakasu shrugged his shoulders. Even Kaoru, who could place first amongst people who lacked common sense, had a bitter smile on her face.

"Normally, people wouldn't think of something like this...."

"Godou-san, is a person filled with good and bad, eh — "

"Erm...... I don't think that's the case. It's a little uncommon, but basically, I should be quite a normal person."

Godou made an appeal, from the bottom of his heart.

However, the response from his surroundings was blunt.

"Ha — ..... I see. To my Honored Uncle, having gone through so many battles and great adventures, it cannot be helped that this is ' normal' to him. Certainly, he has an unmovable presence of mind. Truly, this is enlightening."

"Or rather, a normal high school student wouldn't be playing poker and bridge in a room like this."

"At least I, besides myself, have never seen anyone who's enjoying their youth that's surrounded by beauty. Godou-san, those words of yours have zero persuasive power."

Godou was unanimously told that, and reflexively felt disappointed.

The days of autumn will pass by, day by day, and someday, he would hear the footsteps of winter.

This, was a scene from that season.

Omake - Vanity of Worldly Desire/Maid in Heaven

It was night. Upon awakening, Godou somehow found himself in a classroom.

What took the place of a bed or futon was cardboard and newspaper that was lined up as an improvised replacement for bedding.

Godou picked up the cellphone beside him. It was just past three in the morning.

Feeling thirsty, he surveyed his surroundings with his still half-awake eyes.

Though not much money had been spent on it, the interior of the classroom was still well-furnished. Just like him, there were three male students sleeping on cardboard. On the desk close by, was a small ceramic bottle.

What was it that was inside the bottle again? If I recall correctly, it should be a drink.

Half-asleep, Godou downed the entire contents of the bottle in a gulp. Like that, he fell asleep with a thud.

Cheep, *cheep*. The chirping of baby birds could be heard.

Soft sheets. Shafts of sunlight shone through the windows, it was a calm morning. In the middle of a complete awakening, he was still dozing off hazily —

While fully enjoying all of the comfort, Godou listened to that sound.

Kyuru, kyuru, several small wheels were turning, the sound of something rubbing against the floor.

"Good morning, Godou-san. This morning, you sure are taking things slowly, hm?"

A light voice like a baby bird that did not feel out of place in this refreshing morning.

Flinging off the sheets, Godou got up.

Facing the owner of the voice that came from above the bed, dressed in the garments of a head maid, was Arianna.

"To have not even have changed your clothes yet..... Even though you've always been an early riser."

Godou seemed to be wearing a tank top, in place of pajamas.

Pointing that out, Arianna entered the room while pushing a small trolley.

Characteristic of freshly baked bread, there were croissants with an unbearably good smell. He took a whiff of the aroma and vapor of the coffee, a cup of espresso.

Those were placed upon the trolley. A breakfast serving enough for two.

Godou was nervous. She, Erica's maid, why was she here, beside his bed? In the first place, where was this place? What have I been doing up till now?

As these questions popped up in his head, Arianna pushed the trolley to a stop beside the bed.

Like that, she gave a bow, and departed the room in silence.

If you did not let her grasp a steering wheel, and not let her near a pot in the kitchen, with her tidiness and humble behaviour, she would be the model maid that combines these two attributes to the highest level.

A languishing voice was heard. It came from the futon.

A young girl was wrapped in the thin futon sheets. Reddish gold hair. Resembling the large-flowered camellia, a glamorous beauty. Her appearance dishevelled by her sleep, this bishoujo was none other than Erica Blandelli.

Eh? Godou was perplexed.

Erica, who did not like wearing thick clothes when she slept, was here.

She would definitely never wear pajamas. In a tank top and underwear, and occasionally wearing nothing at all (!), she would go straight to bed. However, this morning, it looked like she was wearing sleep-wear.

Where the futon did not cover, he could see that she was clad in a black and white garment.

...... More importantly now, there were other pressing issues he had to catch up on.

"E-E-E-E-E-E-E-Erica, why are you in such a place? N-no, rather, why am I in such a place!?"

"...... Ara Godou, early as always, aren't you."

He was told, in a half-awake voice.

Ambition, courage and beauty, possessing all of the above was the girl named Erica.

However, only in the morning were those traits clouded. Replacing that with a lovableness that stimulated one's want to protect and a certain innocence. Really, what a girl.

"Fufu. If you've woke up, I'll be glad if you could have woken me up earlier...... Even though I dislike waking up early, it'd be a different story if my love would whisper sweet nothings to me in my ear...."

Erica was giving off a charm different from her usual self, causing Godou to be in discomfort.

Honestly, letting him see this side of her was unfair. She was overflowing with charm that was hard to resist, even under normal circumstances. Furthermore, strengthening it was foul play . He wanted to raise the white flag and surrender.

"..... Hey, Godou..... is it fine if I beg you?"

Lazily pulling the futon over her head, Erica leaned in close.

"Beg!?"

"Yep. For the first time in a while, it's a morning that I've welcomed together with you. With the proper etiquette, we ought to commence the necessary actions. Essential to a pair of lovers who love each other, is the morning rite."

A whisper, sweet like honey. Almost like a lover's talk.

"I-If you tell me something like that, how am I supposed to respond...."

"Fufu. The same obtuse man as always. If I don't spell it out for you, you wouldn't understand?"

Erica whose face was almost in contact with his, smiled tenderly .

It was not a smile of a devil that entrapped people. Nor was it the face of the lioness that reveled in hunting and strife.

Filled with feminine tolerance, he felt a faint sense of womanhood from her. It was the first time he had seen this expression.

Not good. His heart was starting to beat furiously.

He wanted to enjoy his time with Erica forever.

Godou was jolted by a strong urge, and then, he realized the truth of the situation, in utter shock.

What happened to the distance between him and her? And then , before he had realized it, he was glued to Erica. The sheer volume of indescribable extravagance that she was proud of, her soft chest. He could feel that sensation pushing against his arm! Even pressing on top of his hand, and she whispered straight into his ear, asking him!

Godou was usually to the extent of being on guard against any further contact with Erica than was necessary.

However, this time, he did not go against being glued to her tightly, with no vigilance whatsoever. Surely, it must have been because he could feel absolutely no bloodthirst from Erica.

She was perhaps, under the assumption that Godou would not run away that she had drawn this close.

Because of that, he had naturally accepted it ——

"I think that it's appropriate to grant me a compensation of this degree, don't you think so? After all was said and done, I did as you had commanded, going so far as to put this on for you.... Aaah , come to think of it, I went to sleep wearing that. Fufu, do you want to see it again?"

Erica shook off the futon that she was covered with.

Looking straight at the black and white outfit she was clad in, Godou was taken aback. This was the so-called apron dress, and wasn't this Arianna's favourite garment, the maid uniform?

"You, really do demonstrate a majesty and forcefulness that is hard to resist, at times. Making me do that too, last night..... If the person who ordered me wasn't Kusanagi Godou, I, will certainly turn them into rust on my sword."

With a seemingly drowsy expression, Erica started to behave like a spoiled child.

The apron dress was open at the chest area, and an abundance of cleavage could peek through the opening. Godou looked away, flustered.

"Sheesh..... Do you intend on teasing and toying with me this time? My King, really is a terrible person."

Her words were coated in honey, and he was kissed by Erica.

Godou was terrified by the comfort.

In the beginning, it was a quiet contact, suited for the refreshing morning. Before long, their lips were damp with saliva, their mutual mouths stuck to the other. Slushing sounds could be heard from where his lips met with Erica, as she wrapped her lips around Godou's. What came next was, of course, her tongue ——

Not good. Right away, Godou shook himself off, away from Erica.

If this continued, he would not be able to hold himself back. Entrusting things to her entreaty, and running swiftly away to somewhere else, even he himself did not understand what he should do. Only escape remains!

Jumping off the bed, Godou ran to the door.

Heading towards the outside of the bedroom, his consciousness had a momentary blackout. Just, what is this ——

Cheep, cheep. The chirping of baby birds could be heard.

Soft sheets. Shafts of sunlight shone through the windows, it was a calm morning. In the middle of a complete awakening, he was still dozing off hazily —

While fully enjoying all of the comfort, Godou listened to that sound.

"...... Breakfast has been prepared. Please wake up."

It was the voice of Liliana Kranjcar.

Some time ago, it was Erica, this time it was Liliana....... Feeling uneasy, Godou got up.

It was a Western style bedroom. He was on top of a bed. A little distance away was a table, and on top of it was coffee and orange juice, onion salad, bacon and eggs, and lastly, freshly toasted bread .

It resembled an American style breakfast.

That was fine. The problem was, the female knight standing at the bedside.

With her beautiful silver hair tied in a ponytail, for some reason Liliana was wearing a maid uniform. Her slender, fairy-like body was clad in a black and white apron dress.

To say whether she looked good or not in it, she did look very good in that.

Truly, a splendid dress. But, why was she dressed like this?

"...... Won't you tell me the meaning of that cosplay?"

"Cosplay? You seem surprised by that."

To Godou's question, the dignified female knight (or rather, a maid now) raised her eyebrows.

"In the first place, the one taking a look at the uniform meant for Karen that had come in the wrong size, and then suggesting to me to wear it was.... you. Furthermore, the other day, when Erica had fickly worn it, it had considerable effect, which was unfair."

Hold on a second. What, was that thought of imprudence?

While facing the Liliana who was raising a complaint, Godou felt as though he was swooning.

"For others to know of my wearing of garments like this, will affect my reputation and honor as a knight. To me, it is a difficult order to accept. But, as your number one knight, and the steward of the King, I cannot fall behind Erica, and as such, I have no choice but to wear this — "

Her skin, which was as white as snow, was dyed a deep red till her nape. It must be due to her embarrassment.

Liliana's appearance was awfully cute, and yet gallant.

"To be able to appreciate this form of mine, is a special privilege exclusive to Kusanagi Godou...... I, thinking that, will bear with this disgrace, and pray silently for the swift ending of this pain! And yet, you had said things like, 'You sure look good in that', with a nonchalant air, giving a commentary...... !"

That was the tone which condemned what was evidently the wrongdoings of a tyrant.

That being said, Liliana, with her face a deep red, and her eyes slightly moist, she implored for Godou's response.

It was not the expression of the dignified female knight. No doubt, that must have been the cuteness of a [girl].

"H-Having been told that, I had no choice but to wear this. Kusanagi Godou..... at times, you become a surprisingly sly and ruthless human!"

..... He was blamed for something he did not remember doing.

Godou became deeply puzzled. Did I really say that?

"We-well now, please have your breakfast while it is still warm. While doing that, I will give you a breakdown of your schedule for today..... Firstly, at noon, you have a lunch meeting at Hotel Turin. "

The female knight and steward, but right now the girl was also a maid.

Godou was puzzled by the report from she who had also changed the topic. A lunch meeting at a hotel?

"With whom, for that lunch meeting? It seems extremely exaggerated."

"The Campione Kusanagi Godou, will be interviewed by Saint Pintoricchio. Establishing a proper reputation is merely natural, don't you agree?"

"Saint Pintoricchio?"

"The mentor of that Lord Salvatore, and also the legitimate disciple of Saint Raffaello. The new leader of Turin's association, [The Olden Dame]. One generation above both me and Erica..... Among the young people who have attained the title of Great Knights, the most powerful person of them all, on par with Rome's Lord Francesco."

While politely informing him, Liliana, however, raised her eyebrows again.

"I've told you this last night, haven't I? Have you already forgotten? ...... Or, could it be."

Her expression was one of being taken aback as she fixed her gaze on him, and Godou's heart started to beat faster.

Was it the garments that he was not used to seeing on her, or was it the overflowing allure, which was different from usual, from her beautiful face, that he was troubled by.

"Like last night, are you planning to play pranks on me again? Like, ordering me to do something unreasonable in the middle of a serious conversation."

He had totally no memory, if he had really done something like that.

The him from a few hours ago, Godou had wanted to say something. Liliana too, no wonder.... Eh?

"You really, do hide a helpless side of you underneath. But, Kusanagi Godou is a godslaying Devil King. Even so, that is indeed..... as your retainer, perhaps I ought to be able to take something like that."

Liliana's eyes were burning with enthusiasm. While still in that state, she leaned in closer.

The flow of this situation, isn't it weird? Wasn't it a scene where she had been complaining harshly to me?

"...... Thus, as your woman, I had inexplicably and sweetly felt that kind of willfulness from you. Yes, should you wish for it, I would not mind if you asked me to wear yet another different garment, again....."

Liliana's lips drew near.

A conservative kiss..... or so he thought, but suddenly her tongue had entangled with his.

The excitement felt as though all the thoughts he had been holding back had been released in one breath.

A-Aren't there are various problems with this!

Flustered, Godou shook himself off, away from Liliana. He then ran towards the door, looking as if he were flying from the bed. I have to get away fast! The instant he reached the outside, his consciousness blacked out —

Cheep, cheep. The chirping of baby birds could be heard.

Godou pulled the futon over his head and raised his level of wariness. Was it the same pattern as the previous times?

Once again, confirming the situation..... From the opening in the futon, he surveyed the condition of the outside. He could see the tatami floor, and it looked like a Japanese-style room.

This futon was not on a bed, but was rather laid out directly on the tatami floor.

"...... It looks like you've woken up, your Majesty."

It came! The voice of Seishuuin Ena, descended on him from above his head.

"Actually, I've specially tailored the clothes that your Majesty has been into recently. That's why, I thought to let you have a little look.... so I came."

Clothes. Vocabulary that provoked his sense of wariness.

And furthermore, [so I came]? In other words, implying that there was no prior appointment, and no schedule to meet up?

"Sheesh.... I can hear you breathing, so I already know that you've woken up. Your Majesty, look here properly!"

Suddenly, he was stripped of his futon. The culprit was of course, Ena.

This place was a single detached house with a garden —— Moreover, it looked like he was in a room of genuine Japanese style architecture, the inside of a Japanese style room.

He recalled the time he had stayed at his relatives in the countryside, their house and the hot springs. However, in the interior of the room were many things that looked out of place. There was a maid with an attractive figure and face.

The frills complimented the look of the apron dress in a lovely way.

The black haired hime-miko Seishuuin Ena, was clad in that.

Being a Yamato Nadeshiko and a nature's child, she was the owner of a complicated profile, but now she was a maid.

"..... You, why are you dressed like that?"

"Don't say that your Majesty, haven't you been into this recently ? I've obtained intelligence that you had occasionally enjoyed yourself with this when you had gone to Europe."

While slightly blushing, Ena said.

"That's why Ena has done so too, because I didn't want to be different from everyone, and tried it out...... But, although I'm totally fine with just wearing it, coming to your Majesty's side to show it to you was dreadfully embarassing —— "

"I-If it's e-embarrassing, you don't have to make yourself wear it ."

"That's even more irritating! At great pains, I was taught what your Majesty liked, doing so would render that all meaningless.... Ena too, wants to do something for your Majesty, so please don't say something so cold-hearted!"

Ena said, stating her pure feelings.

Even though she was a free spirit who always walked her own path, at times she was surprisingly sweet.

Well, this must be that something that was restricted during the contact of a guy and girl, a rare emotional side that practically cannot be seen in daily life.

" —— Ena-san!? Why is Ena-san here!?"

Abrupting opening the fusuma[28], and an all-too-familiar girl entered the room.

She was Mariya Yuri. While having hair a strong light brown color, one could sense a strong feeling of being [Japanese style] from this beautiful girl. She was also another staunch Yamato Nadeshiko.

Seeing Yuri's get-up, Godou was a little shocked.

It was not the uniform he was used to seeing, nor was it the miko costume. Above the simple Japanese clothes that were worn, was an overall apron. That, on the girl who was more family-oriented than anyone else, despite being an ojou-sama, it did suit her very well.

However, was it for the purpose of standing on the same level as Ena who was dressed as a maid, or was it some sort of fancy dress.....

"With regards to this place, though I have been told that we were the only two here, Godou-san and I, have you invited her on purpose?"

The eyes of the sagacious hime-miko, were slightly shaken with sorrow.

Godou was startled. According to her personal statement, it seemed Ena had came at her own personal convenience. Truly, he could not remember, and his guilty conscience was non-existent.

However, curiousity and feelings of guilt were awakened in him. It was probably due to Yuri's beautiful face and pitiable cuteness ——

Nevertheless, it would not do for him to remain silent. *I have to appeal for my innocence!*

"N-no, that's not the case. It's just that Seishuuin had come here at her own convenience."

"Doing that expressly, Ena-san did? Then, what exactly is that appearance......?"

"Sorry, I wanted to show these newly tailored clothes to his Majesty, no matter what. Umm, you know, his Majesty has been into this recently."

In response to the puzzled-looking gaze, Ena had said indifferently.

It looked like she did not display the sweetness that she had shown to Godou, to her hime-miko comrade. Yuri was shocked by that explanation, and her facial expression was frozen stiff.

"No way —— A maid costume like that, was it!?"

"Yep. Erica-san and Liliana-san too had worn it with pleasure, and the Seishuuin house from Europe had provided me with this information. Look, it was from Liliana-san's maid."

"T-then, those clothes are also from her!?"

"Nope, this was prepared by the young master of the Lu family. They are deploying a Maid Palace in Japan, and actually, it looks like its sponsored by his Majesty. When I requested it of the young master, he had said that, 'My Honored Uncle pretends as though he has no interest most of the time, but he does actually like it, surprisingly.'"

While listening to the conversation between the hime-miko, Godou was crestfallen.

Karen had this kind of part-time job (Though for her, it should not be free of charge). And that Yinghua guy, had said something that produced misunderstandings..... again.

The Yuri who did not understand Godou's despair, stiffly and imposingly glared at him.

"What are you planning to do, Godou-san?"

"W-What do you mean?"

"Even as a joke, you, who is called a [King], is always enjoying making girls wear different kinds of clothes..... Immersing yourself in a perverse hobby of that sort, is unbecoming. What will be harmed is you yourself, the reputation of your majesty, you know? You ought to be maintaining your standards more!"

For the first time in a while, he was shouted at in a thundering voice.

Noble and dignified, the rebuke from the girl. Godou drew his head back.

"Be-besides, if you were really that into it, I wish you'd have said something even earlier, it'd have been better that way, wouldn't it?"

Eh? Suddenly, the rebuke taken a rather sharp change in direction.

Before the surprised Godou, Yuri had said, while being bashful and embarassed.

"E-Even I, will not spare any effort for the sake of contributing something for you to feast your eyes on. That is, um, I think it is a little perverted, and not a hobby that one can make public with a loud voice, but, considering whether I have the capacity to accept that side of you is.... troubling."

No, no. I'm the one that's troubled. Godou returned with a tsukkomi, in his heart.

Recently, the hime-miko have started to simply do whatever they wanted.

"Well then, actually I've had a few spare sets made. Yuri, come here and wear one too, and allow our King to feast his eyes upon that sight."

"No way!? Please don't say that suddenly. I have not yet prepared my heart —— "

"What are you saying, didn't you just say that you'd accept his Majesty's hobby? Doing it together with Yuri, Ena would feel reassured, too. Look, just like this, quickly undress yourself......."

"P-please don't forcibly undress me!? U-um, I can do it myself.... "

The uninhibited nature's child pulled off the overall apron from her willowy friend, unfastening the kimono's sash.

Thereupon, the beautiful hime-miko refused the officious support being offered, and with a discouraged face, loosened the collar of her kimono, and placed her hand on the sash —— the rustling sound of clothes could be heard.

H-hey, what are you doing changing your clothes before me. An objection started to rise up in his throat.

However, being unable to find the voice to speak those words out, Godou could only gulp down his saliva.

Yuri's body which was delicate, and yet also put on sufficient enough flesh, was right before his eyes. Her ivory white skin, and the sight of that seductive back, caused his tension to increase greatly.

Not good! I have to get away from here!

Narrowly managing to heed the advice of his reason, Godou pulled the earlier mentioned futon over his head.

Cutting off all the information received from his sense of sight and hearing! Just as he resolved himself to disregard the paradise before his eyes, once again, his consciousness began to black out. The voices of both Ena and Yuri faded away.

Instead, he saw the back of a lone man.

His looks which had ought to have been graceful, was painted with fearlessness of long military service, like rust.

Surely, he must be one who has lost interest in battles, after a long time, and was exhausted of it all. However, once, he had stood tall on the battlefield, and should have certainly played an active role, like a fierce god.

Solemn and sorrowful was the man's back, and his profile.

That was certainly, the figure of a hero, weary of battle ——

"...... Although you seemed to be having a nightmare, but are you alright, Honored Uncle?"

Godou awakened, to Lu Yinghua's voice.

It looked like it was not yet morning. This classroom was the planned venue for Nanami, Sorimachi and Takagi's [school swimsuit + maid cafe] that had been changed to [Maid Cafe China Arrangement Inn] to be set up (The maid unit dispatched from the Lu family, had rejected both the school swimsuit and nekomimi idea).

The day before the school festival, the trio who looked back at the rousing festival eve with just a backward glance, had given all their efforts into the preparations.

Then, Godou had helped them out, and the four of them decided to stay overnight. The preparations ended somewhere close to one past midnight, and Kusanagi Godou + the idiot trio had gone to sleep like that ——

If he took a look, he would see that Nanami and the others, the trio, were sleeping like a log nearby. It did not look as if they were waking up.

"Why did I have that kind of dream....?"

Distinctly conscious of what had occurred, Godou recalled the chain of nightmares (?).

Hereupon, Lu Yinghua, with a know-it-all air, looked at the small bottle on the table. The one he had drank in the night while half-asleep.

"If it was a strange dream, then undoubtedly, it must be the effect of the drug, the *Handan Dream*[29]. The people who've taken a dose of that medicine, would dream a dream concerning the future."

"Future, you say?"

"Yes. Something that would happen a few years later, possibly, or even something that might happen decades later, it looks like."

"I see.... Because of that, I saw a strange dream."

Godou nodded his head in acknowledgement. Magic was ineffective against a Campione. However, oral intake was another story.

The secret medicine of paralysis that Liliana had made him drink before had splendid effect.

"Upon hearing that it had slipped into the materials that the trio had brought out from my family's warehouse, I came to retrieve it, even if it's early in the morning. It was truly unexpected that my Honored Uncle had consumed it."

"Sorry. I thought that it was alcohol that was left on the desk, and had drunk it while half-asleep."

Remembering the act, late at night, Godou apologized.

"But, I'm relieved. I was surprised by that absurd dream. It was actually the fault of that dodgy medicine."

"Well, although the medicine is indeed the cause......."

Knowing that the main cause of the dream was not his own latent desires, Godou felt relief wash over him.

Lu Yinghua then calmly said to him.

"In the case that the person taking the dose possesses great spirit vision, the medicine has reasonable probabilities of showing you [the near future], it looks like. The Campiones do excel in that regard, right? To disregard it as being a mere dream is too hasty. What kind of dream was it?"

"N-no, the contents aren't that important! Don't worry about it!"

Godou dodged the question, flustered.

If the term probability was brought up, then the authenticity of that should be low, he thought, as he instructed himself to forget it as soon as possible.

And the dream that Kusanagi Godou saw, was thus erased from his memories.

A few hours before the school festival started, those were the so-called happenings that occurred in the morning.

Afterword

It's been a while, everyone.

Somehow, this series has reached its 8th volume.

This is all thanks to everyone's support. Let me once again express my utmost thanks to all readers.

From the beginning of the story, I had already had the concept of the "unreliable narrator" in the descriptions of the protagonist. The kind of literary device often used in mystery novels.

Many scenes in this series are narrated from the protagonist's point of view. Frequent mentions of "normal" and "pacifist" have no credibility at all, but I'm sure all readers knew that a long time ago (laugh).

Furthermore, this volume also incorporates the concept of " Campiones, the Young Generation." Perhaps a certain person might show even more protagonist attributes than the incumbent. A certain useless person after a charming makeover.

It would be wonderful if everyone enjoys the stories of the young kings.

"The Duel in Victorian London of the Marquis resembling Robert Downey Jr's Sherlock Holmes", "Rumored Legends of the Onee-sama at a Certain Bar Before She Became the Ruler of the

Martial Realm", "The Masked Hero and One Night Stands, the Full Story", and other ideas, these were all cut due to the page count limit.

This time the love comedy theme is "Attitudes: Sudden Changes and Acceptance." Our protagonist is fated to undergo five or six more rounds of attitude changes before his final personality is complete. However, I don't have any intention of writing the end yet. (wry laugh)

Next volume departs from the casual and relaxing, returning to the main plot.

School festival, Knights of the Round Table, the legendary sword, the King of the End, these will probably be the key words. So, how will things unfold?

Takedzuki Jou, October 2010

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ **Meiji era**: represents the first half of the Empire of Japan during which Japanese society moved from being an isolated feudalism to its modern form.[1]
2. ↑ **Showa era**: the period of Japanese history corresponding to the reign of the Shōwa Emperor, Hirohito, from December 25, 1926, through January 7, 1989.[2]
3. ↑ **Sudachi**: small, round, green citrus fruit which belongs to the papeda subgroup of citrus plants. [3]
4. ↑ **Sensei**: In Japan, Sensei is not only used to refer to teachers , but also to artists, doctors and other educated people and figures of authority as well. It can be used to show respect to someone who has achieved a certain level of mastery in an art form or skill.
5. ↑ **Tatami**: type of mat used as a flooring material in traditional Japanese-style rooms.
6. ↑ **Miyagi**:[4]
7. ↑ **Aoyama Doori:** Main street in Aoyama, Tokyo.
8. ↑ **trying not to step on someone's shadow**: In (Japanese?) magic, shadows have several meanings. One is the element opposing light, but it is also viewed as part of the soul. As such, it is sometimes seen as rude to step on the shadow of others, especially superiors. Alternatively, it's a reference to a Japanese children's game where a child, the *it*, needs to step on one of the other children's shadows to make that child *it*, rinse and repeat.
9. ↑ **Replica Round Table at Winchester Castle**: Ask Wiki[5]
10. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C5%8Djinshi
11. ↑ **Xiaolongbao**: [6]

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12. ↑ **Shrimp dumplings**: [7]
13. ↑ **Pork dumplings**: [8]
14. ↑ **Yakshini**: a broad class of female nature spirits from Hindu mythology, known to be beautiful but vengeful.[9]
15. ↑ **Dry Curry**:[10]
16. ↑ **Claíomh Solais**: The "Sword of Light" or "Shining Sword", one of the "Four Treasures of the Tuatha Dé Danann"[11]
17. ↑ **Tuatha De Danann**: They are the Irish gods. Later they moved underground and became fairy-like beings.[12]
18. ↑ **Witenagemot**: ("meeting of wise men" in Old English) a political institution dating from Anglo-Saxon England.[13]
19. ↑ **Chi You(蚩)**: a mythical tribal leader best known as the tyrant who fought the Yellow Emperor.[14]
20. ↑ **Hero of the Red Dragon**: Henry VII used the Red Dragon of Cadwaladr along with the Tudor colors of white and green as his flag at the Battle of Bosworth Field, defeating the House of York and ending the War of the Roses. Henry's claim to the throne was tenuous because it was derived through his mother and by illegitimate descent. [15]
21. ↑ **Lugh**: Irish deity represented as a hero and High King in the distant past. Has many epithets such as Lámhfhada (long arm), Ildánach (skilled in many arts), Samhildánach (equally skilled in many arts), Lonnbeimnech (fierce striker) and Macnia (boy hero).[16]
22. ↑ **Rip Van Winkle**: a short story about a man who wandered up a mountain away from his wife's nagging, took a nap and woke up twenty years later.[17]
23. ↑ **Priory of Sion**: a name given to multiple groups, both real and fictitious.[18]

24. ↑ **Order of Cistercians**: a Roman Catholic order of monks and nuns.[19]
25. ↑ Bruce Lee.
26. ↑ Kill Bill.
27. ↑ I'm sure you guys should know what Riajuus are.
28. ↑ Japanese sliding door
29. ↑ Basically, the title which I've translated as 'Vanity of Worldly Desires'. The Handan Dream has a really long story behind it, so I guess if you're curious you can go look it up. Google 邯.